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BY BIRTH A LADY.

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BY BIRTH A LADY.

A Tale.

BY

GEORGE MANVILLE FENN,

AUTHOR OF 'MAD,' 'WEBS IN THE WAY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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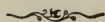
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BY BIRTH A LADY.



CHAPTER I.

IN THE BALANCE.

As if to show him how long he had been heedlessly wandering through the [streets, Charley found Sir Philip quietly seated at the hotel on his return ; and though his father carefully forbore to make any reference to the past, Charley fancied that he could detect a sense of elation on the old gentleman's part — one which seemed to anger him more as his heart kept reproaching him for the evening's lapse.

But Sir Philip made not the slightest reference to the events of the evening, not

even remarking upon Laura's indisposition ; but there was an impressive way with which Sir Philip parted from his son that night, that Charley interpreted to mean satisfaction, and he frowned heavily as he sought his own room.

In spite of his troubled mind, without recourse to narcotics, the young man slept soundly and long, waking, though, with a strange heavy sense of oppression troubling him, as the thoughts of the past night's events came upon him slowly one by one, till he was half maddened, hating himself for the part he had played, or, rather, for his weakness.

Then he recalled Ella's quiet peaceful face as he saw her turn round to Max ; and he asked himself why he should consider himself as in any way bound to her who refused to hold him by any ties. Morally he knew that he was quite free, and that,

bitterly as he regretted the last night's tête-à-tête with Laura Bray, he had shed sunshine upon her heart, and left her happy and exultant.

Then he remembered his promise to accompany her to the terminus at Paddington. He could not go—he would not go! But that was some hours distant yet, and for a while he felt that he need not trouble himself about it.

But what should he do? Write a long letter to Laura, telling her that she was to forgive his weakness of the past night, and bid her farewell for ever, while he made immediate arrangements for going abroad somewhere? Was it too late in life for him to get a commission? If he could, he would have to wait months perhaps, and he wanted to leave England at once. Africa seemed to present the field that would afford him the most variety and change.

He would go there for a few years. He could soon make arrangements; and in the excitement of hunting, he would find the diversion he so much required.

But then about Laura? He recalled the scene at Lexville, where she had hung upon his arm and wept; and then the events of the past night flashed upon him, and he groaned as he told himself that he had been cowardly and weak—that as yet he had had no proof that Ella was lost to him for ever.

What was the last night's scene, then?

He stamped upon the floor with impotent rage, and determined at last to forswear all ties. He went out directly after lunch to make preliminary inquiries respecting the means for leaving England. Paddington, Laura, Max, Miss Bedford, were driven from his mind, and he hurried along, but only to hear his name uttered as he passed an open carriage; and starting

and turning round, there was Laura, flushed and happy-looking, sitting with her hands outstretched to him.

He could not help himself, though he called himself weak and folly-stricken, as he took her hand in his, watching the bright flush give way to a deadly pallor.

‘How she loves me!’ thought Charley, as he leaned on the side of the barouche; and it was from no vanity or conceit; he was too true-hearted and genuine, too honest and simple-minded. ‘Why should I make her unhappy, perhaps for life, when, by a sacrifice, I can send joy into her heart—into the heart of that loving old man? What have I to care for, what to live for, that I should hesitate?’

‘Ella!’ his conscience whispered; but the whisper was very faint; it was hardly heard amidst the tumult of contending thoughts. The African scheme was for-

gotten, and Charley Vining was in the balance. One vigorous pressure on either scale would carry the beam down. How was it to be?

How was it to be? The indicator was pointing directly upwards, each scale poised and motionless. Coldness, distant behaviour, returned letters, an evidently favoured rival—a man almost beneath contempt—misery for those who loved him, and more bitterness: all these in one scale; and in the other—

A passionate determined love, strong as his own, a woman pleading to him for what he had so long refused, warmth, tenderness, no rivalry, gratification to Sir Philip, and, above all, the knowledge that on the past night he had allowed himself to be betrayed into a warmth for which he had been blaming himself as though he had committed a grievous sin.

Which was the scale to go down, when Laura was in trembling tones, and, in a retiring way, asking him to take the seat by her side, for the time would soon be at hand for the visit to Paddington?

Her voice trembled audibly as she spoke, but the latter scale did not go fiercely down: the indicator only moved slightly in Laura's favour, as, remembering his promise of the day before, Charley said he would go, and took his seat by her side. It was only a slight motion, and the faintest breath from Ella's lips would have sent that scale up—up—up rapidly, till it kicked the beam.

But there was no breath there, though Charley's heart still clung to Ella fondly. Laura's scale wanted a strong impulse in her favour, and as, half triumphant, half sad, she felt Charley Vining take his place by her side, she flushed, then paled, and again and again a strange shiver of dread

passed through her frame. Once even her teeth chattered, as if some fearful illness was attacking her. But the disease was only mental, and, seeking Charley's hand, her own nestled in it—clung to it convulsively, as if she dreaded even now that she would lose him, when so very, very near the goal of her hopes, of her plotting and scheming; and yet she had not known of his anger against self, and the plans for going abroad; though had she known them, she could have trembled no more.

Laura's scale was growing heavier; for Charley did not withdraw his hand, but let hers rest therein. It only wanted one addition either way now, for the weighing was just at hand—the scales were no longer evenly poised. Which was to sink boldly? The striking of the clock at five would decide it, and it was now four.

CHAPTER II.

THE WEIGHING.

IF any one will take the trouble to refer to *Bradshaw's Guide*—that fine piece of exercise for the brain—for the month in the year in which the events being recorded took place, he will find, in connection with the Great Western Railway service, that whereas the down express left Paddington at 4.50 P.M., there was an up train due at the platform at 4.55.

It was to meet this latter train that Mr. Bray's barouche was being rattled over the newly macadamised roads, with Charley Vining and Laura therein.

No one could have sat by Laura's side for an instant without remarking her ex-

treme agitation; and as Charley turned to gaze in her pleading face, he felt something like pity warming his breast towards her—her agitation was so genuine, and she had shown him the night before how earnest and passionate was her love.

Pity is said to be very nearly akin to love, and Charley's pity was growing stronger. Why should he not take the good the gods provided him? She asked no more. But no; there was that one great proof wanted; and his words were quite cold and commonplace as he said to her,

‘You seem unwell. Do you not think it would be better to return home? Why, this poor little hand is quite chilly, and you shiver. You must have taken cold last night.’

‘Cold? Last night? No, no,’ she said hoarsely; and he felt the pressure upon his

hand tighten. 'We must meet Nelly, and I am quite well, Charley. I never felt more happy.'

He encountered her glance, but it awoke no response in his breast; and as he read her countenance, he saw there the tokens of a terrible agitation, and surely he may be excused for imagining himself the cause.

'At last!' said Charley impatiently, as he handed Laura out, trembling violently; but the next moment, though she was deathly pale, the agitation seemed to have passed away, and taking his arm, she held to it tightly.

'Ten minutes too soon,' said Charley. 'Shall we go round to the waiting-room?'

'Yes, please,' cried Laura eagerly; and walking round, he stopped to read a way-bill.

'Let me see,' he said; 'this train leaves first. Ours comes in five minutes after.'

‘Take me into the waiting-room,’ said Laura anxiously. ‘It is cold out here.’

‘I fear that you are going to be unwell,’ he said, attending to her request.

‘No; indeed, indeed I am quite well, dearest Charley,’ she whispered, and an impatient frown crossed his brow; but he said no more, only half led, half followed her to a window looking out upon the platform, where there was the customary hurry previous to the departure of a train, when the first bell has rung. Porters running here and there with luggage, cool passengers, excited passengers, box- and wrapper-laden ladies’-maids seeking second-class carriages; footmen bearing fascies of umbrellas and walking-sticks; heavy swells seeking smoking-compartments; Smith’s boys shouting the evening papers; and as they gazed through the great plate-glass window of the waiting-room, the hurry and bustle seemed

to have an interest for Charley he had never known before.

‘We shall be in plenty of time when this train has gone,’ said Laura; and she clung very tightly to his arm. ‘I long to see Nelly again. Don’t you think she improves?’

‘Very much. I quite love that child!’ said Charley with some animation. ‘She is so piquante, and fresh, and genuine!’

A sort of gasping sigh escaped from Laura’s breast, but he would not heed it.

And now the bustle was nearly over; the last bell had rung, the inspector had taken his last glance, the doors were banging, and the guard’s whistle was at his lips, when the inspector held up his hand, as there came the pattering of hastening feet on the platform.

‘Bai Jove, portare, make haste, or we shall miss it!’ cried a familiar voice.

‘This way, sir,’ was the reply; and an official trotted by with a black portmanteau on his shoulder and a bag in his hand; and Charley started as if he had received a fatal stab, for directly following, clinging to Max Bray’s arm, shawled and muffled, and pale as ashes, Ella Bedford passed the window.

‘Max!’ exclaimed Laura excitedly, while, as Charley made a movement to reach the door, she clung to his arm. ‘Dearest Charley,’ she whispered in low impassioned tones, ‘my own love, my dear life, do not leave me! pray, pray do not leave! I love you dearly, more dearly than ever, and my heart bleeds for you—truly—faithfully!’

She could say no more, for her emotion choked her utterance; but she clung to him wildly, as he stood, now pale and motionless as a statue, gazing through the

window. And in those brief moments what had he seen ?

Ella handed into a first-class compartment, Max following her, while her pale face was directly opposite to Charley, and only a couple of carriage-lengths distant. Then came the bang of the door, the piping whistle, the shriek of the engine, then the rapidly increasing panting snorts as of impatience to be off; the carriages glided by; and where Ella Bedford's face had been the moment before, was first one and then another, strangers all; then the guard's own, then blankness — a blankness that seemed to have made its way to his soul, till looking down he became aware of the stony face gazing up into his, the wild eyes, the parted lips, and the arms clinging to him so tightly.

His face softened as he gazed down at her, and then a sigh tore its way from his

breast; a sigh that seemed to bear with it the image of a pale sweet face; and from that moment it was to Charley Vining as if he had been transformed into another man.

‘My poor girl!’ he said softly, more than pityingly, as he drew her arm closer to his breast.

‘Charley!’ she sighed gently; but there were volumes in that one word; and had they been alone, she would have thrown herself upon his breast, where she felt now she might cling. Then her eyes closed, a faint hysterical sob passed her lips, and she smiled, as if from a sense of ineffable satisfaction, as she felt his strong arms supporting her—that he was bearing her towards the inner room; and then all was blank.

Ten minutes after, Laura unclosed her eyes, to find herself upon a couch, with

Nelly and Charley at her side; and starting up, she rested upon one elbow. Then she fixed her eyes upon the latter, and caught at his hand.

‘You will not leave me?’ she gasped hoarsely.

‘No!’ he whispered almost tenderly. ‘I feared that you were unwell.’ And he passed his hand across her damp brow, smoothing back the raven hair; and Laura sank back, her eyes closed and a smile upon her lip, drawing with her his hand, which she held tightly in both hers; for, saving Nelly, they were now alone.

A quarter of an hour passed in silence, and then Charley Vining said gently:

‘Do you think you can bear to be moved?’

‘Yes,’ she said, rising eagerly and fixing her eyes upon his, ‘if you are with me. But,’ she said, leaning towards him and

whispering, 'do not be angry; only tell me, to set me at rest—tell me that you will not—Max—dear Charley, you know what I mean.'

'Follow Max—your brother?' said Charley sternly; 'no!'

The next minute Laura was leaning upon his arm, and they sought the carriage, Nelly taking Charley's other arm, and whispering to him as he turned towards her with a sad smile on his lip,

'I'm so sorry, Charley, and yet so glad, and I don't know how I feel; but tell me, is it to be *brother* Charley?'

'Hush!' said the other sternly, as they reached the carriage.

Had he not been so preoccupied, Charley Vining would have seen that a strange man, rather shabbily dressed, was close beside him, vainly attempting to gain his attention; for, after handing Laura and her

sister into the barouche, he was about to leave them to return alone; but the imploring look of dread in Laura's eyes stayed him, and yielding to her outstretched hand, he leaped in and took his place opposite.

Upon reaching Harley-street the strange man seemed to be there before them, and Charley would again have left, but Laura begged him to go with her upstairs; and seeing how pale and disturbed she was, he accompanied her to the drawing-room.

'There!—need I tell you on my honour,' he said, taking her hand gently, 'you need be under no fear.'

'And—and, Charley,' she said appealingly, 'you will not judge me harshly?'

'Judge you harshly?' he said; 'no.' And as she held out her hands to him, he took her gently to his breast and kissed her.

'Do you know how happy you have

made me?' she whispered, clinging to him and gazing up in his pale honest face.

'No,' he said in the same tone; 'but I fear I have pained you sorely.'

'Charley!'

'Laura!'

There was no other sound heard in that room but those softly uttered words; and when, a minute or two after, Mrs. Bray quietly opened the door unobserved, she stepped back again on the points of her toes smiling with a satisfied air, and posted herself as a sentinel upon the stairs.

And all this while that strange man was impatiently watching the windows from the other side of the street.

'Couldn't get to see you before, sir,' said a voice, as Charley Vining left Mr. Bray's house in Harley-street. 'Perhaps you'll

run over that while I follow you and wait for farther orders.'

Charley started, and looked up to see that a rather shabbily-dressed man was walking away from him, after placing a note in his hands.

'Mr. M. B. went to Crescent Villas at nine this morning, stayed ten minutes, returned to Bury-street, left Bury-street at three in a cab with a black portmanteau, and was driven to the front of the Colosseum. Waited an hour, and was then joined by Miss E. B. carrying a small black bag—very pale, and evidently been crying. Mr. M. B. said aloud, "At last!" as he handed her into the cab. Driven rapidly to Paddington-station. Took first-class tickets to Penzance, and left by 4.50 express. Are we to follow?'

So read Charley Vining, the letters at times swimming before his eyes. He glanced

round, and the bearer was a dozen yards in his rear. But he waved him back. A quarter of an hour ago, and he had told himself that he was free; but the suggestion at the end of the letter whispered him that some links of his old chains still clung around. But no; he would not have them followed. Why should he? What was it to him? But for his infatuation, he might have known to what all was tending. It was nothing to him now; but a sigh that was almost a sob escaped from his breast, as, once more turning, he waited till the man was alongside.

‘Tell Mr. Whittrick he need take no farther steps,’ said Charley in a voice that he hardly knew for his own; and touching his hat, without another word, the man glided off, disappearing round the corner of the next street so rapidly, that when, upon second thoughts, Charley would have

set him another task, and hurried after him with that intention, he was out of sight.

Five minutes after, Charley was in a cab and on his way to Crescent Villas; where, after a little parley, he was now admitted to the presence of Mrs. Marter, red-eyed, furious, and ready, apparently, to make an onslaught upon the first person who offended her.

Before he had been there long, the rapid flow of the angry woman's words told of how, by cunning, flattering, and attention, Max Bray had gained a footing in the house; the weak vain woman believing that his visits were all upon her account, and willingly accepting the presence of Ella as a blind. Her only sin was a love of flattery, attention, and Max Bray's escorts to the various places of amusement; but now the veil had dropped from her eyes, and she spoke.

‘It has all been planned for long enough,’ she exclaimed passionately, ‘and they have gone off together.’ And then she burst forth into a furious tirade against deceit, forgetful entirely of how she was hoist with her own petard.

Charley could hear no more, but hurried away, confused, doubting, heart-sick. What faith could he place in any one again? He had gone to Crescent Villas in the hope that he was, after all, wrong; that there was some mistake which might be cleared up; and according to this woman the idol of his heart had been a monster of treachery and deceit.

He was ready to make any allowance for the mad passion of a woman who found that she had been made the tool of the designing; but, after all, what could he say to his wounded heart after the scenes he had witnessed? What right had he now to

trouble himself, though — what was it to him? There was nothing to palliate what he had seen ; and now he must begin life afresh. What he had to do was to draw a line across the mental diary of his life—a thick black mark between the present and the bygone—and at that line he told himself his thoughts must always stay ; for upon that past he could not bear to dwell.

Forgive her? He had nothing to forgive. She had always told him, from the first, that it could not be ; while he had blindly and impetuously rushed on to his heart's destruction.

CHAPTER III.

BEGINNING AGAIN.

AND how about Laura? Well, she loved him, and it was his father's wish. He had committed himself to it now, too; and if he were to marry, why not her as well as any other woman?

So mused Charley Vining, weakly enough; but he is here held up as no model—simply as a weak erring man, whose passions had been deeply moved. He had been, as it were, in a fearful life-storm, to be left tossing, dismasted, and helpless, now that a calm had come. Here, too, was the friendly consort offering her aid to lead him into port—the port that he had hoped to enter gallantly, with ensign flowing. But

now, as this was impossible, he would let matters take their course.

He met Sir Philip Vining at dinner; and though the old gentleman studiously avoided all allusion thereto, yet he marked the change in his son, and was inwardly delighted thereby.

‘Father,’ said Charley, as they sat over their wine, ‘I’m about tired of town. When shall we go back home—home—home?’ he said, repeating the word. ‘How pleasant that seems to sound!’

‘My dear boy, when you like; to-morrow, Charley, if you wish.’ And the old gentleman spoke earnestly, for of late his heart had pricked him sorely; and had his son now brought Ella to his side and said, ‘Father, I shall never love another; this must be my wife,’ he would have struggled with himself, and then given up and blessed them. But now it seemed that there was a

change; the attentions to Laura had been marked; and, hushing his conscience, the old man told himself that matters would soon come right after all, and he spoke cheerfully.

‘Well, let’s go back to-morrow, then,’ said Charley. ‘I want to see the old place again.’

‘You are not ill, Charley—you don’t feel in need of advice?’

‘Ill!’ said Charley, ‘not at all! I want a change, and to see the old place.’

‘By the way, Charley, Bray called here to-day; he wanted me to dine there again, but I declined, as you said you would be back. I said, though, that I would go up in the evening. We are discussing the drainage question of Holt Moors. You will not mind my leaving you. I thought, too, that perhaps—’

‘I would go too,’ said Charley smil-

ingly. 'Well, yes, I've no objection; little Nell is come back. Do you know, dad,' he said cheerfully, 'I should like to give that girl a nice little well-broken mare? She would ride splendidly. Couldn't we pick up something before we go down, and let it be for a surprise? A nice little thing that would hunt well, without pulling the child's arms off.'

'My dear Charley, you give me great pleasure, you do indeed. We'll see about it first thing in the morning. My dear boy,' exclaimed the old man, rising, and crossing to his son's chair to rest his hands upon his broad shoulder, 'Heaven bless you, my dear boy! Are the old times coming back?'

'I hope so, father,' said Charley, smiling; but there was something very sad in his tone.

'Not in that way, my dear boy,' said

the old man tenderly. 'Indeed, indeed, Charley, my every act and desire has been for your good.'

'Father,' said Charley sternly, 'do you see that?' And he made a mark on the white cloth.

'My dear boy, yes.'

'That must divide the past from the present. All on that side is to be forgotten. Let it be as if dead. Now for the clean blank page of the future.'

He held out his hand, which was eagerly taken by Sir Philip, and then they were silent for some time; when, in quite changed tones, Charley said, looking at his watch,

'Eight o'clock, dad! Shall I ring for a cab?'

Sir Philip did not speak; he only bowed his head, and then wringing his son's hand, he left the room.

CHAPTER IV.

OF WHAT ARE MEN'S HEARTS COMPOSED?

‘HOORAY, here’s Charley Vining!’ cried Nelly, as Sir Philip and his son entered the Brays’ drawing-room; and bounding over the carpet, she ran up, and caught the latter by the hand; but as Charley shook both her thin hands warmly, he glanced across the room to where Laura was standing, flushed and happy.

‘Are you better?’ he said, as he crossed over.

‘Better? yes,’ she said softly; ‘and so happy!’

There was such a look of intensified joy in Laura’s face, that as he took his seat beside her, Charley Vining smiled pleasantly. He was accepting his fate.

And why not, he asked himself, when, with all their eccentricities, the family seemed ready to worship him? Sir Philip and Mr. Bray had no sooner taken their places in a corner of the lesser drawing-room, and commenced their discussion upon the projected improvements, than Mrs. Bray crossed over to where Charley was seated, and probably for the first time in her life forbore to shriek, and, leaning over him, actually whispered, as she stooped and kissed him on the forehead.

‘Bless you, Vining! you have made us all so happy! But I have not said a word to him.’

Charley felt disposed to frown; but there was a genuine mother’s tear left upon his forehead, and he pressed Mrs. Bray’s hand as she left him, carrying off Nelly at the same time.

It was all settled, then; it was to be.

And why not? Let it be so, then. Some people said there was no fate in these things; what, then, was this, if it were not fate?

But he accepted it all, asking himself the while, could the gentle tremulous woman at his side be the Laura of old? How she drank in his every glance, eagerly listening for each word! Could he, as he had said he would, thoroughly dismiss the past, life might, after all, be endurable.

So he reasoned, as the evening passed away.

They had had tea, and Nelly had been sent to the piano to play piece after piece, not one of which was listened to, for those present were intent upon their own affairs. Charley talked in a low voice to Laura, Mrs. Bray dozed in an easy-chair, and Nelly kept to her music.

Meanwhile the question of draining Holt

Moors had been discussed and rediscussed. Farming matters had been talked over, and the state of Blandfield Park; Mr. Bray strongly advising a particular breed of sheep for keeping the grass short and lawn-like, giving his opinions freely, and at the same time listening with deference to those of his old friend.

At last, during a pause, Sir Philip caught Mr. Bray's eye, and nodded towards the other room.

‘That’s a picture, Bray!’ he said.

‘Ah,’ said Mr. Bray, as he gazed for a few moments at where—a noble-looking couple—Charley and Laura sat together in the soft light shed by the lamps, ‘I wish, Vining, I had had such a son. It seems hard to speak against one’s own flesh and blood, but my Max—’

He did not finish his sentence, but shrugged his shoulders, laughing pleasantly,

as tall thin Nelly came and rested her weak loose body against his shoulder, before laying her cheek against his bald head, afterwards polishing the shiny white hemisphere with her little hand, rubbing it round and round, round and round; while, apparently approving thereof, Papa Bray drew his child upon his knee, and went on talking.

But suddenly he ceased; for, rising, and with her hand in his, and one arm round her waist, Charley Vining walked with Laura towards where the old men sat, and Nelly, with the tears in her eyes, glided away to the seat just vacated.

‘Mr. Bray—father,’ said Charley quietly, as he stopped in front of them, ‘Laura has promised to be my wife: have you any objection?’

The next moment Sir Philip Vining had folded Laura in his arms, kissing her

lovingly, as Mr. Bray caught Charley's hands in his, shaking them warmly.

‘My dear boy,’ he exclaimed, ‘you make me very proud—happiest day of my life!’

‘Charley, my son,’ said Sir Philip, stretching out one hand to take his son's, and speaking in a voice that showed how he was moved, ‘thank you, thank you; you have made me very happy.’

Half an hour after, they were leave-taking; and as Charley kissed Nelly and bade her warmly ‘good-night,’ there was a tear left upon his lips.

‘What, little one!’ he said gaily, ‘in trouble? What is it? You don't think I've jilted you, do you?’

‘Don't talk stuff, Charley!’ she said gravely. ‘I'm very happy; but I feel like marble—just as if there were dark veins running all through me.’

‘Marble? veins?’ said Charley in a puzzled tone.

‘Yes; dark veins, like sorrowful thoughts; for though I’m very glad that you are going to be my own dear brother—and something like a brother too!—I can’t help feeling sorry about my poor Miss Bedford.’

Charley started from her as if he had been stung; but no one but Nelly noticed it. Five minutes after, Sir Philip and he were in the Brays’ carriage, and on their way home, for Mr. Bray had insisted upon their having it in place of a cab.

There was no farther talk of going back to Blandfield Court till the Brays left town next week, and to all intents and purposes the Vinings lived in Harley-street. But Charley found time for a visit to Mr. Whit-trick, to see if there was any payment due.

‘Happy to attend upon you, if you re-

quire my services again, Mr. Vining,' he said, as he pocketed a cheque; and then he bowed his client out.

It was that same morning that, returning to lunch in Harley-street, Charley found Laura seated frowningly over a note, which she made as if to conceal upon his entrance; but directly after, as if blushing for her weakness, she stood up, holding the letter in her hand.

'Am I to be jealous?' he said laughingly, as he saluted her.

'I was afraid it might hurt your feelings, Charley,' she said, as her arms were resting on his shoulder. 'Can you bear to hear its contents? It is from Max.'

'Yes,' said Charley moodily, and with the veins in his forehead swelling.

'He asks me to try and mediate—to try and make you think less angrily of him.'

'Where is he?' said Charley abruptly.

‘I do not know,’ said Laura. ‘Somewhere in the west of England. The post-mark is Plymouth.’

‘Laura,’ said Charley sternly, ‘I cannot forgive him. Max and I must never meet! Don’t look so serious—I cannot help it. I am, I know, hard and unrelenting—But there, no tears! Why, you are trembling. I am not angry.’

‘No, no; I know you are not,’ she whispered, nestling closer to him. ‘You must not be. I shall be so glad to get down to the old place again.’

‘And I as well,’ said Charley.

And, probably in deference to their wishes, both families started on the following day for their country seats.

CHAPTER V.

PREPARING THE RIVETS.

‘*Con-gratulate* you, my dear Vining! do, indeed,’ said Hugh Lingon, coming up to Charley in the hunting-field, when he had been home about a fortnight.

‘What about?’ said Charley, who had attended every meet, and tried his best to break his neck as he rode straight, taking everything that came in his way.

‘What about?’ said Lingon. ‘Why, about your coming marriage, to be sure. Haven’t seen you before, or I should have given you a word or two. Rather too bad of Laura Bray, though.’

‘What was?’ said Charley very impatiently.

‘Why, making such a pair of tongs of me, with which to fish for her hot roast chestnut—meaning you, of course, Charley,’ said Lingon, with a laugh.

‘Don’t be a fool!’ said Charley gruffly.

‘Not if I can help it,’ said Lingon good-humouredly. ‘But you know how I was made a fool of, and then pitched over at any time, when your sultanship thought proper to be attentive.’

‘Long time finding a fox this morning,’ said Charley impatiently, as he turned his horse along by the side of a spinney. But Hugh Lingon was not to be shaken off, and trotting up to his side, fat and good-tempered, he talked on.

‘I should have expected that you’d have given up all this sort of thing now, old fellow,’ said Lingon; ‘but I suppose you are having your run out before the knot is tied. I say, though, how well Laura looks!’

‘Does she?’ said Charley absently; and it was very evident from his quiet abstracted manner, that he was thinking upon other matters.

‘Does she! Ah, I think so. But mind you, I’ve an idea that Nelly will grow into a handsomer woman altogether. I like Nelly,’ he added simply.

‘So do I,’ said Charley, starting from his reverie. ‘She’s a lovable girl.’

‘I say, young man,’ exclaimed Lingon, ‘that won’t do; you can’t have them both.’

‘Pish!’ exclaimed Charley, putting the spurs to his mare. ‘There, I’m going on. Good-morning, Lingon.’

‘But I’m going your way, Charley,’ cried the other, spurring up alongside. ‘Don’t be in such a hurry, man! It isn’t often one sees you now. I want to know when it’s to be. Our girls are sure to ask me, for they’re all red-hot about it.’

‘When what’s to be?’ said Charley, with a wondering gaze.

‘O, come, I say, now, that’s a good un!’ laughed Hugh Lingon, till his fat face was full of creases and rolls, some of which threatened to close his little twinkling eyes. ‘Going to be married, and got it all settled, and not know the day! Ha, ha, ha! Charley Vining, that is a good one! I do like that!’ And he gave his friend a hearty slap on the back. ‘Come, I say, tell us, old fellow!’

‘This day month, I believe—there!’ said Charley viciously; and again he essayed to leave his friend behind.

‘By the way, Charley,’ said Hugh, continuing alongside, ‘I want you to do me a favour.’

He spoke so earnestly, that the other drew rein and turned to him.

‘What is it?’ he said.

‘Well, I hardly like to ask you, but just now I’m in a fix.’

‘Well, but what is it? How do you mean?’ said Charley.

‘Well, you see, I’m short of money, and I’m a good deal bothered; for I’d promised to pay my tailor, and now I can’t do it.’

‘How much do you want?’ said Charley quietly. ‘I’ve none here; but I’ll draw you a cheque when I get home.’

‘O! I’m much obliged—I *am*, ’pon my word!’ said Lingon. ‘Don’t I wish, though, that I could draw cheques, and come that sort of thing! I’m quite ashamed to ask you. But it isn’t my fault; for you see I had the money, and was going to send it, when who should pop down but Max Bray, and ask me to lend it to him—five-and-twenty pounds, you know. He wanted fifty; but of course that was out of my

reach altogether. I lent him all I had, though; for he said that he should only want it for two days, when he'd be sure and send it back. Nelly's brother, too, you see, so that I couldn't well refuse him.'

Hugh Lingon did not see the black angry look upon Charley's face, and he went on.

'He went to the governor after he left me, and got fifty pounds out of him; so I found out this morning when I went into the study to see if I could raise the wind myself, for I had an awful dunning letter from my tailor for breakfast, and there was the governor in no end of a rage — put on that grand magisterial air of his, and begins to talk to me like he does to the clodhoppers who have been having a drunk and a fight. And, lo and behold, it comes out that Mr. Max promised to send his back the next day without fail; and the

governor swears he'll make old Bray pay up, if Max doesn't answer his last letter, for he has written three, and had no reply. The last one he read me the copy of—all about ungentlemanly dishonourable behaviour, and so on. I believe the old chap would like to commit him for obtaining money under false pretences. But, I say, don't run away, Charley. I may come and have the cheque, mayn't I? for it's of no use to try the governor again till Max Bray has paid up.'

'Yes, yes; come when you like!' cried Charley, turning and breasting his mare at a high hedge on the left, which the gallant beast cleared, but with hardly an inch to spare; and then they went crashing through the copse, and were out of sight in a minute.

'Well, that's one way of giving a fellow the go-by!' muttered Hugh Lingon. 'Why,

I wouldn't try that leap for five hundred pounds! nor would any one else who had the least regard for his neck. What did he fire-up about as soon as I mentioned Max Bray's name? By Jove, though, as Max says, he don't seem highly delighted about his good fortune!

Other people made the same remark about Charley Vining, and also noticed how hard he hunted, riding in the most reckless way imaginable, but always seeming to escape free of harm, when more cautious riders met with the customary croppers, bruises, contusions, and broken limbs.

CHAPTER VI.

HAD SHE WON ?

IT was one of the things generally known in the neighbourhood of Blandfield, that Sir Philip Vining gave up the Court to his son, who, in a very short time, was to confer upon it a new mistress in the shape of Laura Bray.

Every one said that it was an admirable match ; and old ladies, who had set themselves up for prophets, laughed and nodded together, and reminded one another of how they had always said so. That croquet-party at the Court was not for nothing, they knew !

Then came a round of congratulatory calls, and a general disposition amongst the

callers to declare that they had never heard of anything that had given them more pleasure.

‘Really,’ they said, ‘it was exquisite, and just the thing that was wanted to make the Lexville circle complete. For, you see, Sir Philip was indeed most charming, but he gave so few dinner-parties!’

‘But what Charles Vining could see in that great, tall, coarse woman, when there were my nice quiet gentle girls, I don’t know. But there, every eye forms its own beauty!’

So said Mrs. Lingon; and, in fact, allowing for a little variety, so said every mother of marriageable daughters; but all the same, at the end of a fortnight Laura Bray was to be Mrs. Charles, and in future Lady Vining, always allowing, of course, that nothing occurred to put off the wedding, that every one declared to be, on the whole, rather hurried.

There was certainly, too, a little disappointment felt by some of the marriageable young ladies; but that was soon mastered; for there was to be the wedding, after all, if they were not to be the principals in the thrilling ceremony; and also, after all, there was not one of them who might not be asked to act as bridesmaid.

It was the theme of discussion throughout the district. Even gentlemen had their say, as they hoped that Vining wouldn't be so shabby as to cut off his subs. to the hounds, even if he had no more idea of hunting. While, as for the ladies, they knew to an inch how many yards of white gros-de-Naples there would be in Laura's wedding-dress; how many breadths there would be in the skirt; and that Miss Bray had decided not to have it gored.

'And quite right too,' said some with a titter, 'with such a figure as she has!'

‘Don’t you think Laura Bray looks quite yellow and thin?’ said the elder Miss Lingon, who was certainly neither yellow nor thin, but very plump, fair, and dumplingy.

‘O, decidedly!’ said her sister. ‘She looks anxious and worried, too.’

‘Well, no wonder,’ said the elder Miss Lingon, with a sigh. ‘Any stupid would know that it is a most anxious and trying time for her. She is about to take a step which—’

‘There’s not much fear of your taking, Miss Fan,’ said her sister spitefully. ‘And how you should know anything about its being an anxious time, I’m sure I don’t know, without you read it in a book.’

The elder Miss Lingon tossed her head.

‘But I know why she’s anxious,’ said the second Miss Lingon. ‘Hugh told me. ‘It’s because he will hunt so recklessly now.’

‘I don’t believe that’s it. All gentlemen hunt,’ said the other.

‘You can believe what you like,’ was the snappish answer. And there the matter dropped, as each lady waited anxiously for the request that should make her a bridesmaid.

But, all the same, Laura did look thin and anxious. Not that Charley Vining was wanting in attention, for he was constantly at the Elms; but there was a great dread always oppressing her, that the wedding would not take place. Each day that passed without adventure, she reckoned as so much gained; and though Miss l’Aiguille was engaged with her staff especially on Miss Bray’s account, and dresses for bride and bridesmaids were in rapid progress, yet would Laura start at the slightest sound, and tremble as every letter came to the house.

She counted the days and the hours that must intervene, and mentally checked them off as they passed away. She clung nervously to Charley as he left her at night, and seemed loth to let him leave her, though he smiled at her anxiety and tried to seem happy, but all the while there was an aching void in his heart, as he told himself that he was about to be guilty of a wrongful act.

And still the time glided on. A few more days, and Laura told herself that she could be at rest.

‘At rest!’ She shivered as she repeated the words, and then tried to look pleased at the rich presents sent by Sir Philip Vin-
ing, or brought to her by Charley himself to swell the bridal trousseau.

But she could not conceal the agitation she felt; for ever, by night and day, thrown athwart the light of her understanding was

the dark shadow of a peril to come—a peril coming as surely as day would succeed unto night.

Costly preparations at Blandfield Court; painters and decorators busy; fresh carpets here, and fresh carpets there; Laura fetched over by Sir Philip to give her opinion upon this, her consent to that, or to choose something else. The old gentleman seemed never happy save when he was superintending some fresh arrangement that should add to the pleasure and comfort of his future daughter-in-law. He was almost angry at times on seeing how little interest was taken in such matters by his son; but ever ready with an excuse, he set it down to Charley's renewed pleasure in the sports of the field.

Laura did not complain, although Nelly, but for her youth, might have been taken

for the favoured one, since she was constantly Charley's companion, to the great astonishment of Hugh Lingon. For the little well-broken mare had been purchased, and had come down to Blandfield, where, one day when Nelly was over with her sister, Charley proposed a ride, the horses were brought round, and Nelly's rough black pony sent back, to her utter astonishment; while, when informed that the graceful little creature that stood arching its neck, and softly pawing at the gravel, was her own, Nelly's joy knew no bounds, as, in turns, she literally smothered Sir Philip and Charley with kisses.

It was not from mortification at being so unceremoniously left that Laura turned pale; but, in her nervous state, it seemed that the danger she apprehended—the peril that should stay the wedding—might come from any direction, and that a delay of a

month, a fortnight, or even of a week, might be fatal to her prospects; for might not Charley alter his mind? or—no, there was no fear of that now. But might not this prove a danger that should delay that which she so ardently prayed for? Nelly might meet with an accident, and be brought back half killed.

There was certainly some foundation for Laura's fears; for had Miss Nelly been left to herself, in her wild exhilaration she would most probably have come to grief; in fact she tried her best to get thrown; but there was ever a strong hand ready to be laid upon her rein, so that, in spite of Laura's forebodings, she was brought back in safety.

Laura counted: six days—five days—four days—three days before—two days before—one day before the wedding; and all this time Max Bray might have been for-

gotten, for his name was never once mentioned at the Elms. Hugh Lingon, though, on making an excuse for not having repaid Charley's loan, mentioned having felt sure that he had seen Max in London, but that he had been unable to overtake him before he disappeared, but that, after all, he was not sure.

That news slightly disturbed Charley, and he winced as he thought upon the probable future fate of Ella Bedford; his brow contracted too, as he seemed to see a pale face appealing to him for help, and he shuddered slightly as he drove away the thoughts.

He spent the evening with Sir Philip at the Elms, and all seemed to be working to the one end.

Nelly was in a tremendous state of excitement, and displayed it as she darted about with brightened eye and flushed

cheek; but now that the time was so near, Laura had so nerved herself that she was calm and composed in appearance, though her heart was agitated by varied emotions.

But what cause could there be for fear? Had not the woman who had been her rival fled, in, apparently, a most discreditable manner, with her own brother? Was not Charles Vining, if not a warm and passionate, at all events a most respectable lover as to his attentions? Surely she could wish for nothing more, if the proverb be true, that the hottest love the soonest cools.

And, besides, how gleefully were all the preparations being made! Gunters were providing the breakfast, and even then the men were in the house. The wedding garments were waiting, and Miss l'Aiguille was coming herself in the morning to superintend the dressing, to the great disgust of Laura's maid. The wedding was expected

to be one of the grandest that had been in the neighbourhood for some years; and the weather had been for many days past so settled and bright, that there was every prospect of the bride being bathed in the sunshine of good fortune.

‘Good-night, for the last parting!’ said Charley, as he held Laura in his arms, previous to taking his departure; and she clung to him, for he was more tender and gentle to her.

He must love her, she felt, or he could not have spoken as he had.

Only a few more hours, then, and the suspense would be at an end. The wedding-breakfast over, dresses changed, the carriage would be in waiting to convey them to the station. They were to pass the first night in London, and depart by tidal boat the next morning for Paris, Marseilles, Hyères, Genoa, Rome—a month

of pleasant touring in Southern Europe; and in that period old sorrows would be forgotten, and her husband's heart would have warmed to her.

But still Laura trembled, for she had been gambling for a great stake.

Had she won?

It seemed so; for once more he repeated those words, 'Good-night, for the last parting!' as they stood in the hall.

'But you'll have to put up with me, my dear!' said Sir Philip, kissing Laura in his turn; 'but I won't bother you—I won't interfere in any way—only let me have my study fire in the cold weather; and don't stop away from home too long. I say so now, because I shall have no chance to-morrow. There, good-bye!'

They were gone; and, proud and elate, Laura returned to the drawing-room. The victory was nearly won, and the happy con-

gratulatory looks of friends and those who were to act as her bridesmaids seemed to be mirrored in her face, as they clustered laughingly round her—Mrs. Bray forbearing to shriek, and little pudgy Mr. Bray disregarding her evening dress as he caught her in his arms, to give her a sounding kiss on either cheek.

Meanwhile Sir Philip and Charley were returning in their carriage to Blandfield: the former light-hearted and chatty, the latter quiet, but apparently content. He had weighed all well, and pondered the matter again and again, and still his heart told him that it was his duty. The faint spark of his old passion, as he called it, that would still keep showing, in spite of his efforts to crush it out, he told himself would soon be extinct—hiding the fact that that spark was a consuming fire that was not even smouldering, but though

concealed, eating its way fiercely to the light.

‘Good-night; heaven bless you, my dear boy!’ said Sir Philip, as he stood, candle in hand, in the hall. ‘It will be hard work sparing you, Charley; for I’m an old man now, and growing feeble, and in want of humouring. You may have your month, but don’t exceed it.’

Charley did not answer; but shook his father’s hand warmly, and they parted.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE POINT.

THE wedding-morning, with all its flutter, flurry, and excitement! The bride pale, but collected; Nelly and her sister bridesmaids appealing vainly to one another for help; hair, that at any other time would fall into plait, or bandeau, or roll, with such ease, now obstinate and awkward, and requiring to be attended to again and again; hair-pins becoming scarce, and, where plentiful, given to bending; eyes with a disposition to look red; hands ditto—for it is winter; while, as if out of sheer spite, more than one nose follows suit, and is decidedly raw and chappy.

‘O, do, do, do fetch a knife!’ whim-

pered Nelly. 'I shall never be dressed in time! I must have a knife to open these horrible old hooks, that have flattened down when 'Lisbeth ran an iron along the back plait. O, what shall I do? I shall never be ready! And the old chilblains have swelled up on my heels, and I can't get on those little satin boots; and I can't go in my others, because they haven't got high heels. I could sit down and have a good cry—that I could! Here, 'Lisbeth—'Lisbeth! why don't Miss l'Aiguille come and help some of us?'

'Lor, miss, how you do talk!' cried the excited 'Lisbeth. 'And is that what you called me back for? Miss Luggle's a-doing of Miss Lorrow, and couldn't leave her, was it ever so. There, don't stop me, miss; they're waiting for pins, and there'll be no end of a row if I don't go.'

'But, please, come and do my back

hair, 'Lisbeth,' cried one of the bridesmaids—a cousin, who was staying in the house.

'Lor, miss, I can't. You must ask Miss Nelly!' cried 'Lisbeth, vainly struggling to get out, for Nelly was holding on with both hands to her dress, and dragging her back.

'There, do let go, Miss Nelly—pray! Here, miss, ask your cousin to leave go, and come and do it. She'll put it right—beautiful!'

'But she has done it twice,' cried the other; 'and see how it has come tumbling down again; it's worse now than if it hadn't been touched!'

'I don't care; I sha'n't try any more,' whimpered Nelly. 'I can't get dressed decent. But you'll all have to wait for me; for I'm sure Charley Vining won't go to be married if I ain't there.'

'For goodness gracious' sake, now just look there, Miss Nelly, at what you've

been and done! You've pulled all the gathers out of my frock!

'Don't care!' said Nelly, throwing herself down, half-dressed, into a chair. 'Fasten 'em up again: you've got lots of pins.'

'Lisbeth—'Lisbeth!' was shouted from the passage, and the girl disappeared.

We have nothing to do with the bride's mental sufferings at present, the remarks now made appertaining to dress alone; but she must have borne something at the hands of Miss l'Aiguille and her staff of assistants, before, tall, dark, and handsome, she stood amidst a diaphanous cloud of drapery, which floated from and around her, descending, as it were, from the orange wreath twined amidst her magnificent raven ringlets.

Miss l'Aiguille clasped her hands, and went down upon one knee in an ecstasy of admiration at the glorious being she had made, as a gentle chorus of 'O!' and 'O,

miss!' was raised by her satellites; while, wonderful to relate, when she descended to the drawing-room, she was not the last, for two of the bridesmaids were not ready.

But Mrs. Bray was there, gorgeous to behold, bearing upon her everything in the shape of costly dress that money would purchase. To describe her costume would be simply impossible, save to say that it was as solid-looking as her daughter's was light and airy—the plaits and folds of her silken robe literally creaked and crackled as she moved, which was all of a piece. Colour there was too; but what, it would be impossible to say, the prevailing hue being warm scarlet, which was shed upon Mr. Bray, whose white vest was so stiff and grand, that nothing could have been whiter and stiffer and grander, unless it was the tremendous cravat that held his head as if he was being garrotted—symptoms of stran-

gulation being really visible in the prominence of his eyes. But then, as he said, in regard to his sufferings, he did not have a daughter married every day.

‘I should have liked for Mr. Maximilian to have been here,’ said Mrs. Bray, as they were waiting for Nelly, who, now under the hands of Miss l’Aiguille, was being made up rapidly—her thin bony form growing quite graceful under the dressmaker’s fingers.

‘Bless me, though, what is the matter?’ cried Mrs. Bray. ‘Laura my dear, pray don’t faint in those things, whatever you do!’

‘Hush!’ cried Laura hoarsely, as, by a strong effort, she recovered herself. ‘Did you—did you say Max was here?’

‘No—no! I said I wished he was here,’ said Mrs. Bray pettishly. ‘I do not see what you have got to turn queer about in that. Your own brother too!’

Laura gave a sigh of relief, and then closed her eyes for a few moments.

‘Only a little while now,’ she thought.

The hour was very near, and surely nothing could stay the event.

Then, summoning her resolution, she began to pace slowly up and down the room. No tremulous maiden now, but a firm determined woman, who told herself that she had persevered and won the lover—the husband soon.

‘What are we waiting for?’ said Mr. Bray.

‘Two bridesmaids,’ said Mrs. Bray: ‘Nelly and Miss Barnett. But we have plenty of time; and the Miss Lingons are not here yet. O, here they are, though!’

The young ladies were set down at the door as she spoke; and soon the Bray drawing-room was well filled.

The horses were pawing up the gravel,

to the disgust of the gardener, who thought of the rolling to be done; but went and drowned his sorrows in some of the beer on the way, with ample solids, in the Bray kitchen.

A bright brisk winterly day, with a wind that kissed each cheek as bride-elect and bridesmaids descended the steps, and entered the carriages drawn up in turn. Rattle, rattle, bang! went steps and doors; footmen were more upright than ever, and raised their chests into glorious hills, crowned with white satin-and-silver wedding-favours—Mrs. Bray insisting upon their being mounted at once.

A grinding of the gravel, and first one and then another carriage departing, Laura, with Mr. Bray, completing the cortége; Mrs. Bray going before, after declaring that she ought to have stopped behind to superintend the wedding-breakfast arrangements.

And proud was Mr. Bray of the stern handsome girl before him; for he had given up the whole of the back seat to his daughter—and her dress. The pallor and look of dread seemed now to have passed away, as if Laura, by her determination, had exorcised the phantom of coming ill; and well-merited were the remarks made, as a glance was obtained at the beauty ‘arrayed for the bridal.’

People had plenty of ill-natured things to say when the wedding was first settled; but now all these remarks were forgotten; and again and again, as the Bray carriage rolled on towards the church, there was a cheer raised; while, on coming abreast of the Lexville Boys’ School, there was a tremendous scattering volley of shouts, followed by a rush, for the boys were to have a holiday for the occasion; and away they went to the churchyard, to cluster thickly

on walls, tombstones, and iron railings—wherever they could find a post of vantage.

Carpet rolled down to the church-gate, and the clerk in a state of fume and worry, that brought him, in spite of the wintry day, into a profuse perspiration, because, no matter how he ‘begged and prayed,’ people would walk over the carpet, and print upon it the mark of their dirty boots.

The church was filled in every part where a view of the communion-table could be obtained; and the pew-openers gave up at last in despair, for the people would stand on the cushions. The organist was ready with the ‘Wedding March’—Mendelssohn’s, of course—and the ringers were already giving those thirsty lips of theirs a dry wipe, in anticipation of the beer to be on the way by and by, when they made the town echo with a peal of bob-majors and grandsire-caters. While last, but not least,

and posted side by side with panting Miss l'Aiguille, who had run down, and was now promising him an account of each lady's dress, with the proper terms to be applied thereto—was the reporter of the local paper, busy at work with a spikey pencil.

He had already put down a list of the notabilities present — people whom 'we observed'—and had added the name of the officiating clergyman, who was to be assisted by a couple more; the two being now engaged in robing in the vestry.

There was no mistake about its being a grand wedding; for the covers were off the communion hassocks—those worked by the Lexville ladies—and people were on the tiptoe of expectation, for the hour was at hand.

Wheels!

'Here they come: the bridegroom, of course!' 'Tain't, it's some ladies!' 'Tain't,

I tell you; the bridegroom always comes first.' 'Sir Philip's chariot is to have four horses, and the first and second grooms are to ride post in blue and silver, and black-velvet caps.' 'There, I was right—they are ladies.'

Such were a few of the buzzing remarks made as the leading carriage drew up to the gates, and the first batch of friends and bridesmaids descended, hurried up to the old church porch, shook-out their plumage, and then swept gracefully up the nave, while remarks full of admiration were passed by those excited fair ones who would not miss a wedding on any consideration, and had duly posted in their mental ledgers the account of every affair that had taken place at Lexville church for the last twenty years; though, during all that long space of time, no one had ever asked them to take the little journey for the purpose of saying, 'I will.'

Wheels again, and another buzz of excited voices, for this time there is a volley of cheers faintly heard.

This is the bridegroom, then; and there is a perfect rustle amongst the ancient and modern doves of Lexville to catch a good glimpse of the stalwart handsome heir of Blandfield.

But the next minute the rustle subsides, for the carriage that stopped at the gate only brought friends and bridesmaids. And so did the next, and the next, till the chancel began to wear a goodly aspect, though every face was turned now towards the entrance, and all were upon the extreme point of the tiptoe of expectation.

‘The bridegroom ought to be here now,’ said some one in the chancel.

‘Isn’t Charley Vining here, then?’ whispered Nelly to her cousin.

But there was no answer.

CHAPTER VIII.

WAS IT AN ACCIDENT?

WHEELS again, and louder cheers than ever; a rolling scattering volley from a hundred young throats.

‘Here he is then, now,’ said some one.
‘The Vinings are so popular!’

More bustle, and pressing, and confusion; the steps round the font invaded, and two small boys mounted on the stove to get a good view, while no one interrupts them; the organ-gallery crammed as it never was on Sundays; and the organist hard put to it to keep people from invading his own little sanctum behind the red curtains, and treading upon the pedal keys.

The boy at the bellows has already

pumped the wind-chest full, and there is a wheezing sound of escaping air. But the excitement down below is now at its height, and a murmur of admiration is heard as pudgy Mr. Bray, hat in hand, leads in Laura—proud, sweeping, stately, and with her eyes cast down, but her head thrown back.

No modest retiring bride she, though the lids do droop and the long black fringes conceal the dark flashing eyes. For she has arrived at the moment of her triumph, and there is a curl to her upper lip as she leads, rather than is led, and passes between scores of the envious.

The chosen one of Charles Vining of Blandfield, the heir to the old baronetcy, Laura knows that there is many a one present who would give ten years of her life to exchange places—to become the future Lady Vining, the leader of the society of the district for miles round. How could

she think of the past, when so bright a future was before her? How could she trouble now about forebodings and shadows of coming evil? All were forgotten as she swept down the long nave, each moment more queenly of aspect.

The chancel screen was passed, and the chancel entered—the chancel filled with friends, who smilingly part to allow her to pass to where the invited hedge—in the bridesmaids—a light and cloudy bevy of eight, all white and pale blue, and pale blue fading into white. Dainty forget-me-nots hidden here by lace, or peeping out there from amidst transparent tissue, while every cheek is tinged with the bright damask-rose hue of excitement. The flowers in the bouquets tell tales of the hands that hold, for they tremble and nod; and more than one of those white-gloved hands has drawn out the end of a delicately-scented

and laced pocket-handkerchief, so as to have it ready for the tears that will be sure to flow anon; but for a moment the tears are forgotten, as the bride appears.

‘Are you ready?’ whispers a voice; and the horribly incongruous-looking clerk comes bustling out of the vestry as the smiling pew-opener dabs the hassocks about, and then smoothes herself down and smirks at everybody, as she wonders how much the wedding will be worth to her.

‘Shall I tell them to come?’ says the clerk again, smiling so that you can see the two yellow teeth in his top jaw, and the one and a half below. ‘They’re waiting to come and begin.’

These remarks of course relate to the clergymen in the vestry, who are warming their boot-toes as they stand in front of the fire, like three shut out ghosts, and discuss the amount of the Vinings’ fortune, and

talk of Laura Bray's lucky hit. But as the questions are put in a general fashion by the clerk, no one conceives it to be his duty to answer, and consequently there is a dead silence; and now Laura feels, as it were, an icy hand slowly passing towards that heavily-throbbing heart of hers, nearer and nearer, as if about to clutch it, only holding off for a few moments to add to her torture in that dreadful pause, broken at length by an ominous whisper that runs through the length and breadth of the church:

'Where is the bridegroom?'

That pause must have lasted some thirty seconds; but to those in waiting it seemed an hour. Laura's eyes were not cast down, but flashing fiercely, and the hand at her heart—the icy cold hand—now moved as if to clutch it, when she drew a long sighing breath of relief; for though

hurt at the apparent neglect, she was once more elate and proud; for a voice at the entry was heard to cry, 'Here they come!' and overbearing the whispers of the expectant crowd could be heard the rapid beat of galloping horses and the whirl of wheels.

'They're a-coming down the road as hard as ever they can gallop,' whispered a man at one of the windows which commanded the way to Blandfield.

'But is it them?' said another aloud.

'Them! Of course it is; chariot and four; blue and silver. And, my word, how they are going it!'

It was an insult, certainly, his not being there in time—a cruel insult to his bride-elect; but Laura would forgive anything, for he had much to forgive in her, she whispered to herself.

'It's all right,' said Mr. Bray, nervously

looking at his watch. 'Blandfield time is always correct; but this church-clock is a perfect disgrace, although we are so foolish as to set our watches by it. Here he is, though!'

Cheering from the boys; galloping horses; whirring wheels, and a rapid rattling rush; and a chariot and four had dashed past the church gates, and away down the High-street of Lexville, as fast as four well-bred horses could tear.

Away it went, swaying from side to side on its springs, faster and faster as the horses warmed to their work; and those nearer to the door ran out into the church-yard.

'They've taken fright and run away!'

'The horses were too fresh; they've done no work lately.'

'Why didn't they have post-horses from the Lion?'

‘Sir Philip and Master Charles were both in it!’

‘They weren’t: there was only one.’

‘I tell you the chariot was empty.’

‘Them two grooms have been at the ’all ale, that’s about it.’

‘The carriage must be smashed!’

Remarks in a perfect, or rather imperfect, chaos jumbled one another as opinions were passed. But at last the news was taken to where, with the icy hand now clutching her heart, stood Laura, not fainting, but stern, pale, and erect, that there was nothing to fear, the grooms had evidently been drinking, and the horses had taken fright, but that the chariot was empty.

‘Yes, yes, it’s all right. Here they come!’ cried a voice at the door; and two bridesmaids about to faint, refrained—‘here’s the barouche, and one, two—yes, there’s four inside.’

And once more there was a buzz of expectation. Such an accident couldn't have been helped, of course ; horses would be restive sometimes, but it *was* hard on the poor bride. But, all the same, those who took more interest in the smashing of a carriage than the linking together of hearts, set off at a brisk run down the High-street.

CHAPTER IX.

RESIGNATION.

THERE was a look of calm resignation on Charley Vining's face as he met his father at their early breakfast that morning, to which he had descended without a trace of excitement. He was certainly carefully dressed, his dark blue morning coat and vest and gray trousers fitting his fine figure admirably, while the utter want of constraint displayed told of breeding as plainly as did his well-cut handsome features.

Well might Sir Philip gaze with pride in his son's face, lit up now by the pleasant smile of greeting ; and even he, the smooth cleanly-shaven old courtier of a bygone school, owned to himself that it would be

a sin and a shame to cut off even a hair of the crisp golden beard that swept down upon his son's breast.

Charley's face was paler now than when we first met him. The ruddy tan had disappeared, to leave his skin pure, fair, and soft as a woman's; but there was no show of effeminacy there. His firm look of determination swept that away, and he was, indeed, that morning a bridegroom of whom any woman might have been proud.

'A good half-hour yet,' said Charley, referring to his watch. 'I shall have a cigar in the shrubbery before we start, dad.' And he nodded to his father and the friends who were to accompany them. 'Shall you have both carriages?'

'Yes, my dear boy, yes!' exclaimed Sir Philip nervously, as his snuff-box came out as if by instinct. 'But, Charley!' he said

in a whisper, 'you won't—I don't think I'd smoke this morning!'

'Not smoke, dad!' laughed Charley. 'Why not? Perhaps as soon as the knot is tied, I may be forbidden.'

'Stuff, my dear boy! But this morning, think of the odour; the ladies, Charley, the ladies!'

'My dear father,' laughed the young man quite merrily, 'surely you are not going to sprinkle that elaborate frill with snuff. Think, dad, the ladies, the ladies!'

'Go and have your havana,' laughed Sir Philip. 'I daresay the fresh air will take off the smell.'

'You won't smoke, of course?' said Charley to his friends.

'O, no, not this morning, thank you,' said one. 'We'll pay attention to your boxes when we come back.'

Charley nodded carelessly, strolled out

in his wedding trim, stood upon the broad façade, and lit a cigar, and then walked slowly down towards the avenue.

‘Mind, Charley, at half-past ten precisely. Don’t forget the carriages!’ cried Sir Philip, throwing up a window as his son passed.

‘All right,’ said Charley quietly; and the next instant he had disappeared among the trees.

CHAPTER X.

NOT BY POST.

THE sun shone brightly through the bare branches, and the soft blue vapour from Charley Vining's cigar floated upwards, but without poisoning the atmosphere, as red-hot opponents of tobacco—the disciples of the British Solomon, the counterblaster—so strongly assert. In fact, Charley's pure havana was fragrant to inhale, and under its soft seductive influence the young man strolled on and on, forgetful of everything but the train of thought upon which his ideas were gliding back into the past.

For as he strolled onward, sending light cloud after light cloud to the skies, there came to him a sense of sadness that he

could not control: Laura, the wedding, passed away as that fair reproachful face floated before him, the soft gray eyes fixed on his, and the white lips seeming to quiver and tremble. He tried angrily to crush it out from his mental sight; but its gentle appealing look disarmed his anger, and back came gently all that he had seen of her, all he had heard, all that she had said to him; and now, for the first time, he asked himself whether his eyes had not deceived him, whether it was possible that she, Ella, so pure, so holy, could have been the woman who hurried by, leaning upon Max Bray's arm.

Sorrow, sorrow, a strange feeling of regret, almost of repentance, seemed to come upon him, as for an instant he recalled the fact that this was his wedding morn, that a great change was about to be made, and that henceforth even the right

would not be his to dream upon the past. He felt then that he must dream upon it now by way of farewell ; and again that soft, appealing, pleading face fled before him, so that a strange shiver, almost of fear, passed through his frame.

What did it mean? he asked himself. Was there such a thing among the hidden powers of nature as a means by which soul spake to soul, impressing it for good or bad, unless some more subtle power was brought to bear? If not, why did the past come before him as it did? for there again was that night when in the pleasant summer time he had told her of his love, and pressed upon her that rose.

Yes, but that was in the pleasant summer time, when there was a summer of hope and joy in his heart, when he believed that there was truth where he had found naught but falsity ; while now it was win-

ter, and all was cold and bleak and bare. He had been thoroughly awakened from his dream; but he would not blame her for what was but his own folly.

Heedless of wet grass and fallen leaves, he struck off now across the park, walking swiftly, as if seeking in exertion to tame the wild flow of his thoughts; and at last calm came once more, and after making a long circuit he entered the park avenue, intending to return to the house.

His cigar was extinct, and it was time now to return to life and action. He must dream no more.

Time? He drew out his watch, and a flush of shame and vexation crossed his countenance, as he saw that it was close upon the hour when he should be at the church.

‘I must be mad!’ he exclaimed; and then he started aside, as close behind came

the sound of galloping hoofs from the direction of Lexville. 'They are coming to seek the tardy bridegroom,' he said with a little laugh; 'but *she* will forgive me.'

'Is this the way to the house—Mr. Charles Vining's?' cried a voice roughly.

'Yes; what do you want?' said Charley.
'I am Mr. Vining.'

'Letter, sir,' said the man hastily. 'I was to ride for life or death; and I was afraid I should be too late.'

'Too late for what?' said Charley hastily.

'To catch you before you went to church, sir,' said the man. 'I heard as I came through that there was a wedding.'

The next instant Charley had taken the letter, and was gazing at the direction; but he did not recognise the hand.

'Where do you come from?' he said.
'Is it very important? I am engaged.'

And then he stopped; for he hardly knew what he was saying, and he dreaded to open the letter.

‘Better read and see, sir,’ said the man gruffly. ‘My horse is dead beat.’

Rousing himself, he tore open the envelope, and read a few lines, reeled back on to the sward by the road, struggled to regain his firmness, and then, with a countenance white as ashes, he read to the end, when a groan tore its way from his breast.

That, then, was the meaning of the strange forebodings, of that soft pleading face; and now it was too late, too late!

‘Curses, the bitterest that ever fell, be on them!’ he muttered, grinding his teeth, and in his clenched fists that letter was crushed up to a mere wisp. ‘And now it is too late! No, not yet;’ and to the surprise of the messenger he turned and dashed off furiously towards the house, where upon

the broad entrance steps stood Sir Philip and the two friends anxiously awaiting him, the former watch in hand. The chariot with its four fine horses, and postillions in their gay new liveries of blue and silver, was at the door, and another open carriage behind ; while a couple of servants were running at a distance in the park, evidently in search of him.

‘My dear Charley, we shall be late,’ cried Sir Philip, as, wet and spattered with mud, his son dashed furiously up. ‘How you have excited yourself to get back! Pray make haste.’

‘Stand back!’ cried Charley hoarsely, as, bounding up to the steps, he tore open the chariot-door and leaped in, dragging the door after him.

The next moment he had dashed down the front window, and shouted to the postillions to go on.

The men turned in their saddles, touched their caps, and before Sir Philip and his friends could recover from their surprise, the carriage was going down the avenue at a sharp trot.

‘Poor boy, he was excited at being so late. Ah, to be sure, here’s a messenger who has evidently come to seek him. It must be later than I thought, for our time must be slow. I must ride with you, gentlemen, instead of with him. Make haste, or we shall be too late.’

In less than a minute the barouche was in motion, and as they passed the messenger, Sir Philip leaned over the carriage side, and shouted a question to the man :

‘Did you bring a message for Mr. Charles Vining?’

‘Yes, sir,’ shouted the man in answer ; and the next moment they were out of hearing.

‘Good heavens, though,’ exclaimed Sir Philip anxiously, ‘look at him!’ And at a turn of the road Charley could be seen in the distance leaning out of the carriage window, fiercely gesticulating to the postillions, who, apparently in obedience to his orders, had broken into a smart gallop, and the chariot was being borne through the lodge-gate at a rapid rate.

It was a two-mile ride to Lexville church, and as Sir Philip’s carriage passed the lodge-gate in turn, he caught one more glimpse of the chariot ascending a hill in front, not at a moderate rate, but at a furious gallop, the vehicle swaying from side to side, till it crowned the hill and disappeared.

‘I suppose it is excusable,’ said Sir Philip, turning pale with apprehension; ‘but what a pity that he should have gone out!’

Directly after, though, the old gentle-

man smilingly observed to his friends that they would only be in at the death; and then speaking to the coachman, that functionary applied his whip, and the horses went along at a brisk canter.

‘More behind even than I thought for,’ said Sir Philip anxiously, as the carriage drew up to the churchyard gates, amidst a burst of cheering from the crowd, and then, smiling and raising his hat, Sir Philip walked up to the church, as there was a loud cry of ‘Here they are!’ passed along the nave, entered the chancel, and taking Laura’s hand in his, kissed it with a mingling of love and respect.

‘But surely you have not got it over? Where is Charley?’ exclaimed the old man.

It was Nelly who gave the sharp cry as he made the inquiry, while Laura stood the image of despair as a rumour ran through the church.

‘Was he—was he in the chariot?’ whispered Mr. Bray, catching his old friend by the arm.

‘Yes, yes; where is he?’ cried Sir Philip, trembling as he spoke.

‘They say the horses must have taken fright and galloped away. The chariot dashed by here a few minutes ago; but they said it was empty.’

‘Mr. Charles Vining in the carriage, and borne away at that mad rate!’ was the whisper through the church, which soon did not contain a man who had not hurried down the road in the expectation of coming at every turn upon the wreck of Sir Philip Vining’s chariot, with horses and men in a tangle of harness and destruction.

But before those on foot had gone far, they were passed by Sir Philip Vining and Mr. Bray in the barouche; for they had hurried away from the scene in the church,

where Laura was seated, pale, despairing and stony, Nelly sobbing violently, and a couple of bridesmaids had fainted.

‘It all comes of having such horrible wild horses,’ said Mrs. Lingon, whose conveyance was a basket carriage, drawn by a punchy cob, given to meditation and genuflections. ‘But there, I hope the poor young man isn’t hurt; and on his wedding-morning, too!’

‘Will you hold your tongue?’ exclaimed Mrs. Bray fiercely. ‘Do you think matters are not bad enough without prophesying ill? There, there, my darling, don’t cry,’ she said softly the next moment to Nelly, who was sobbing convulsively, as she trembled for the fate of him whom she indeed loved as a dear brother. But at last the Reverend Mr. Lingon and his aides appeared upon the scene, and pending the arrival of news, the wedding party were

screened from curious eyes by the refuge offered to them in the vestry, till twelve o'clock striking, carriages were summoned, and, sad and disappointed, all returned to The Elms.

CHAPTER XI.

IN CHASE.

THOSE who ran off on foot, upon first seeing the carriage dash by, gave up after a two-mile race, and the most impetuous of them were standing at a corner when the barouche came in view.

‘What is it? Have you seen them?’ cried Sir Philip, who was standing up in front, and holding on by the driver’s seat, directing him so that the horses were now arrested.

‘No, Sir Philip,’ said one man, ‘they’ve gone right on ahead, but they were nearly over here.’ And he pointed to the wheel-marks, which, in the sudden curve, showed that the chariot must have torn round at a

fearful rate ; so swiftly, indeed, that the equilibrium had been destroyed, and the corner cleared only on two wheels.

‘Drive on!’ exclaimed Sir Philip Vining hoarsely. ‘Gallop!’ And away sped the barouche for another mile along the unfrequented country road.

‘Seen a carriage—Sir Philip’s carriage and four?’ shouted the coachman to a man driving a cart.

‘Ah, raight on ahead, going full gallop,’ shouted the man in reply ; and away once more sped the barouche, till white specks of foam began to appear upon the horses’ glossy coats, to be succeeded by a lather wherever there was the play of rein or trace. Cart after cart was passed, and the same news was obtained of all, till, after a two-mile run without seeing any trace of vehicle or pedestrian of whom to inquire, a farmer’s gig was overtaken.

‘No, sir,’ was the reply; ‘I’ve seen no carriage but yours.’

‘Not one with four horses and postillions?’ exclaimed Sir Philip.

‘No, sir,’ said the farmer, ‘but you’d better not trust to me; I’ve not been long on this road.’

‘Drive on!’ impatiently cried Sir Philip, who now became less agitated. Above four miles from Lexville, and no upset, there must have been time for the first heat of the excited beasts to cool down, and for the postillions to regain command over them; so that he was in momentary expectation of encountering the returning chariot; but still it did not appear.

‘Should we be in time if we found him now?’ exclaimed Sir Philip.

‘What, to get back to the church?’ said Mr. Bray, nervously referring to his watch. ‘I fear not, I fear not.’

‘How unfortunate!’ exclaimed Sir Philip; and then he relapsed into silence, save when at intervals he spoke to the coachman, who kept the well-bred pair of horses at a brisk gallop.

‘Stop here,’ cried Sir Philip, as they neared a roadside inn, where a wagon and half a dozen labourers were standing, ready enough to stare at the rapidly-approaching vehicle.

‘Carriage and four go by here a few minutes ago?’ cried Sir Philip to the landlord, who now came bustling out.

‘No, sir; not by here.’

‘Are you sure?’ exclaimed Sir Philip, with a perplexed air.

‘Sure, sir? O yes, sir, quite sure,’ said the landlord, ‘or must have seen it. We see everything that goes by here, sir.—Haven’t seen a four-horse coach go by,

have you, lads?' he continued, addressing the wagoners.

'No, no,' cried Sir Philip. 'A chariot with four horses and postillions—post-boys in blue jackets?'

'No, sir—no, sir—not come by here!' was chorused.

'We could not have passed them, upset in one of the ditches, could we?' hinted Mr. Bray.

'Impossible!' cried Sir Philip. 'But where could they have turned off?'

'Like to take the horses out and wait, sir? They may come soon,' said the landlord.

'No, no, my man,' hastily cried Sir Philip. 'There is nowhere for a carriage to turn off from the high-road during these last two miles, is there?'

'Whoy yes, sur,' said one of the wagon-

ers, 'there's Bogle's-lane as goes to Squire Lethbridge's fa-arm; and the low lane down by the beck.'

'Ay, lad, and theer's ta by-ro-ad as goes to Bellby and La-a-anton.'

'Laneton — Laneton !' Sir Philip exclaimed. 'Here, my lads,' he cried, and he threw two or three coins amongst the men. 'To be sure! Turn back quick, William; they may have gone that way.'

The coachman turned his panting horses, and they went back at a smart trot towards the by-lane mentioned, a good mile and a half back; while a flood of thought passed the while through Sir Philip's troubled brain.

'Laneton — Laneton ! What could be the meaning of that? But absurd; the horses had taken fright and been turned up there. Of course, the lane would be

very heavy at this time of the year, and it was done to tire out the horses. But then Mrs. Brandon lived at Laneton. It was there that that interview took place with Miss Bedford. But absurd; Miss Bedford had left there for long enough, and no doubt they would find at the entrance of the lane that the carriage had turned down there, and now exhibited the back tracks. They had overshot the mark, and it was a great pity. It was unfortunate altogether, but one thing was evident: the wedding could not take place that day.'

So mused Sir Philip, till, as they neared the narrow entrance that they had barely noticed, another troublous thought flashed upon his mind.

'Did you send a man on horseback from the church?' he asked eagerly of Mr. Bray.

'Man on horseback?' said Mr. Bray,

looking confusedly up at where Sir Philip stood upon the front cushions.

‘Yes, a messenger. Did you send one to the Court?’

‘No,’ said Mr. Bray decidedly.

‘Did any one, then? do you know of one being sent?’ exclaimed Sir Philip.

‘No,’ said Mr. Bray stoutly. ‘We sent no messenger.’

What did it mean, then, that strange man on the panting horse, who had brought a message for his son? Something must, then, be wrong, and this was no accident.

‘Gone down here, Sir Philip, after all,’ said the coachman, pointing with his whip, as he drew up at the entrance of the narrow lane.

‘And come back again, have they not?’ cried Sir Philip eagerly, peering down at

the wheel-tracks in the hope of finding that in his own mind he had been raising up a bugbear of undefined shape and dread portent.

‘No, Sir Philip, they ain’t come back,’ said the coachman, turning his horses into the lane.

The carriage had to be driven here slowly through rut and hole, worn by the farmers’ heavy wagons ; but still at a good sharp trot where the road admitted, till a wagon blocked the way about a mile down, when a good deal of contriving had to be exercised for the two vehicles to pass.

‘Did you see a carriage lower down?’ asked Sir Philip of the wagoner.

‘Ay, sur. A foine un it were, too : four hosses, and chaps in blue, and torsels in their caps. Passed me, ah, moren half an hour agoo.’

‘Were the horses running away?’ asked Mr. Bray, for Sir Philip was silent.

‘Roonnin’ awa-ay, sur? Noa, ’cos they had to wa-ait while I drewed up to ta hedgeside, for t’ la-ane’s narrerer lower deown.’

‘Go on, William!’ said Sir Philip fiercely, for his suspicions were now assuming a bodily form; and it was with anger gathering in his breast that he sat there thinking—knowing, too, the goal to which to shape his course. But he said no word to Mr. Bray, only sat down now, with his brow knit, as he felt the impossibility of overtaking the other carriage; but from time to time he started up impatiently, to urge the coachman to renewed efforts; so that whenever a plain hard piece of road presented itself, the horses appeared almost to fly.

Shame and disgrace seemed to Sir Philip

to have marked him for their own; and he shrank from his companion, dreading, after awhile, to hear him speak; for his son's acts were as his own; nay, he felt that they would fall upon him more heavily. It was cruel, cruel, cruel; or was he mad? Impossible! But what could he do, what could he say?

‘Wait awhile,’ he muttered at last; and then, starting up once more, he ordered the coachman to drive faster. And onward they tore, till the carriage jolted here and there, and the springs threatened to snap; but Sir Philip heeded nothing but his own thoughts, as his heart asked him where was his son. A question that he could have answered again and again, as his brow grew more deeply marked with the anger and shame that oppressed him; but he forbore.

‘Quicker, William, quicker!’ exclaimed Sir Philip at last; and the coachman lashed

the horses into a gallop, but only to hasten the catastrophe that had been predicted for the chariot; for, as the horses sprang forward, and the barouche swayed again with the speed, there was a sharp crack, a swerve, a crash, and the handsome carriage was over, with the horses kicking madly, and the driver and occupants lying stunned and senseless in the muddy road.

CHAPTER XII.

GOING BACK.

As the old novelists used to say, in their courtly polished style, that makes us think that they must have written with a handsome bead-work presentation pen, dipped in scented ink, and held by a delicate hand clothed in a white-kid glove, 'Gentle reader, we must now return to our heroine.'

In the plain English and more matter-of-fact way of the year of grace eighteen hundred and seventy, it is given to my hard steel broad-point to be dipped in the ordinary infusion of galls and copperas—rather bitty by the way, and given to turn mouldy—and then, when well-charged with the ink-rusting fluid to declare that

we have a long arrear to fetch up relative to the proceedings of Ella Bedford, which could not well be told until the career of the two country families had reached the point recorded in the last chapter.

Ella's had been a weary life at Crescent Villas, and she had had much to contend with : the evil tempers of three spoiled children, who resented every word of correction, complained to their weak mother, and enlisted her sympathy ; the pettish frivolous complaints of the lady herself ; and the bitter knowledge that, according to all appearances, she was being made a screen for the foolish flirting attentions of Max Bray.

At one time she was under the impression that the attentions to Mrs. Marter were an excuse for obtaining the entrée of the house ; but the conduct of Max was so entirely different : he spoke to her so sel-

dom, and then in so quiet and gentlemanly a tone, that, from being watchful and distant, Ella was at length completely thrown off her guard, though there seemed no occasion now for her to trouble herself respecting the visits paid to the house.

Vain to an excess, both Mr. and Mrs. Marter seemed to approve highly of the visits of so distinguished a leader of the fashion; but Mr. Marter had his own ideas upon the subject, telling his lady that it would be a fine thing for Miss Bedford; whereupon the weak little woman nodded and smiled.

To use a very trite expression, there was not the slightest harm in Mrs. Marter; but, all the same, she adored incense and the offerings of concert and opera tickets with an escort; when, had it not been for the said escort, she could not have gone, Mr. Marter being a man without, so his lady said, a single

taste; but all the same we must do Mrs. Marter the credit of saying that she would not have stirred an inch to have seen the finest opera in the world without Ella Bedford was of the party; and hence it followed that, willing or no, Ella's visits to places of amusement were not very few.

But Ella was far from being at ease in her mind. She foresaw that the present state of things could not last; and during some capricious fit of Mrs. Marter, when ill-temper, weakness, and petty annoyance were all employed to make her wretched, she would think that to stay out the year was a sheer impossibility. At such times, too, she would feel convinced that Max Bray was playing a part; so that, in spite of his distant respect, she became more cool and guarded in her behaviour; while, as to leaving, she determined to bear all, telling herself, with a feeling of something like

despair, that, go where she would, she must be tracked. Then her thoughts turned on Charley Vining, whom she knew to have called; and, as she congratulated herself upon having escaped him—upon his having given up the quest in despair—the warm tears fell, and she knew in her heart of hearts that she was bitterly disappointed.

But it was quite right,—it was as matters should be, she thought; and she hastily dashed away the tears, little thinking that letter after letter had been sent to her, to be smiled over by Mrs. Marter and Max, as the latter redirected them to the sender, telling Mrs. Marter the while that she was doing an act of kindness and thoughtfulness towards the motherless girl looking to her for protection.

In fact, Max Bray most carefully flattered the self-esteem of Mrs. Marter, till

the foolish little woman felt herself to be a perfect paragon of matronly greatness and virtue. Mr. Marter, too, was taken into their confidence upon this matter of Charley Vining's attentions to Ella.

‘Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Marter, you can act as you please ; for you see, bai Jove ! it would ill become me to be offering advice upon such a matter ; but for my part, I should never let him write to her, or see her for a moment. It’s a great pity, bai Jove it is, that the young men of the present day have not better aspirations.’

‘Quite agree with you, Mr. Bray—I do indeed !’ said Mr. Marter, while his lady smiled her approbation.

‘You see, bai Jove ! it hardly becomes me, as a near neighbour, to say anything against Vining ; but I know as a fact that he worried the poor girl till she was obliged to leave Mrs. Brandon’s, the lady’s, you

know, where she went to last; and when a man has behaved, bai Jove! shabbily to another man's own sister, bai Jove! it's enough to make another man speak!

'Very true, Mr. Bray—very true. I quite agree with you,' said Mr. Marter, in a satisfied air.

'But, there, bai Jove! don't let me come hyar dictating to you. It's like my dooced confounded impudence to say a word. I'm only too grateful to find a welcome, and a little refined female society; for to a man situated as I am, London is a very dreary place. One can get amongst set after set of fellows, and into plenty of inane fashionable drawing-rooms; but, bai Jove! Mr. Marter, that isn't the sort of thing, if I may be allowed to say so, that a man of soul thirsts after. He wants something to satisfy his brain—something that when he's spent an evening, he can go and

lay his head down upon his pillow, *bai Jove!* and say to himself, "Look here, *bai Jove!* old fellow: you've been out this evening; you've been in refined and improving society; and, *bai Jove!* here you are, just as you ought to be at the end of another day—a better man, *bai Jove!*"

'Ah, St. Clair,' sighed Mrs. Marter, 'if you could only say that of a night!'

'To be sure,' said Max, 'mai dear fellow, you've no idea how much better you feel—you haven't indeed; but, *bai Jove!* we must change the conversation.'

With all due modesty on his part, Max changed the conversation; for just then Ella, in obedience to orders, entered the room, playing pianoforte piece after piece, till the hour for Mr. Bray's departure, when—was she deceived? or was that a quiet firm pressure of the hand he was bestowing upon her at parting?

The next minute he had gone, and Ella felt a strange shiver pass through her ; for if there had been any mistake about the pressure of the hand, there could have been none concerning the look which followed.

‘Bai Jove!’ ejaculated Max, as he sought a cab on his departure, ‘how confoundedly slow ! But it’s nearly ripe at last !’

Then to make up for the slowness, Max Bray had himself driven to a highly genteel tavern in St. James’s, where the society was decidedly fast ; so that, on returning about three to his apartments, and laying his head upon his pillow, the slow and the fast society must have balanced one another ; for he snored very pleasantly, no doubt feeling a better man, bai Jove !

CHAPTER XIII.

RATHER CLOSE.

‘BAI Jove, Mrs. Marter, it does a man good to see you,’ said Max Bray, sauntering one afternoon into the Marter drawing-room, carefully dressed, as a matter of course, and with a choice Covent-garden exotic in his button-hole. ‘I declare it makes one quite disgusted with the flowers one buys, it does, bai Jove!’ and then showing his white teeth, he raised her hand, touched the extreme tips of her nails with his lips, and then resigned the hand, which fell gracefully upon the side of the couch. ‘Bai Jove, Marter, I envy you—I do, bai Jove! You’re one of the lucky ones of this earth, only you don’t know it: feast of

reason, flow of soul, and all that sort of thing's blooming, if I may say so, upon your own premises.'

'I'm sure,' simpered Mrs. Marter, 'there ought to be a new official made at the palace—Court flatterer—and Mr. Bray given the post.'

'Wouldn't be amiss, if there was a good salary,' said Mr. Marter, looking up from his newspaper.

'Bai Jove, now, that's too bad—'tis indeed, bai Jove! There are some of you people get so hardened by contact with the world, that, bai Jove! you've no more faith in a f'ler's sincerity than if there wasn't such a thing to be found anywhere.'

'O! but,' simpered Mrs. Marter, 'do you think we can't tell when you are sincere?'

'Bai Jove, no!' said Max earnestly, and with a wonderful deal of truth. 'But look

here: I've got tickets for Her Majesty's to-night—three, you know—for *La Figlia*. You'll go, of course, Marter?'

'Go to an opera!' said Mr. Marter, with a shake of the head. 'I never go to operas—I only go to sleep.'

'O, bai Jove! that's too bad!' cried Max. 'You've never been with us anywhere yet; and I do think you ought to go for once in a way.'

'No, I sha'n't go!' said Mr. Marter; 'and besides, I have promised to dine out. Take Miss Bedford.'

'Bother Miss Bedford! Bai Jove, one can't stir without your governess. I say, Marter, do go!'

'Can't, I tell you; and, besides, I shouldn't go, if I had no engagement,' said Mr. Marter testily. 'You three can go if you like.'

Max Bray seemed rather put out by the

refusal, and for a time it almost appeared as if he were about to throw the stall tickets behind the fire ; but by degrees he cooled down, and after it had been decided that he was to call for the ladies about half-past seven, he rose to leave.

‘But why not have an early dinner here?’ said Mr. Marter.

‘No, bai Jove, no!’ said Max. ‘I’m always here ; and besides, I’ve some business to attend to. Till half-past seven, then —*au revoir*.’

Max kissed the tips of his gloves to Mrs. Marter as he left the room ; and soon after he was being driven to his chambers, where he wrote a long letter to Laura, sent it by special messenger, and then sat impatiently waiting for an answer, gnawing his nails the while.

The reply came at last, very short and enigmatical, but it was sufficient to make

him draw a long breath, as if of satisfaction, though the words were only—

‘Yes! No more; for we are going out.’

Then Max Bray lit a cigar, and sat thinking over the events of the past few days, and of what he had done. He had been several times to the Marters’; he had run down, on the previous day, to Lexville; and a couple of days before that he had posted a letter, the reply to which he now anxiously awaited.

What time would it come? He kept referring to his watch, and then he went over and over again the arrangements for some project he evidently had in view, before sauntering off to his club and dining; when, to his great delight, upon his returning to dress for the evening’s engagement, he found a couple of letters awaiting him, one of which he tore open, and then threw

into the fire with an impatient 'Pish!' the other he took up and examined carefully, reading the several postmarks, and then, smiling as he glanced at the round legal writing, placed it unopened in his breast-pocket.

There was a strange exultant look in Max Bray's eye as he drew on his white-kid gloves that evening, and started for the residence of Mrs. St. Clair Marter, where he found the ladies ready, and did not scruple to behave almost rudely to Ella as he prepared to take them down, hardly condescending to speak to her; but as the evening wore on, and they were seated in front of the orchestra, he condescended to make to her a few remarks, more than one of which drew forth a smile, from their satirical nature, as, evidently in a bitter spirit, he drew attention to the various eccentricities of dress in their neighbourhood.

Max Bray did not know, though, that within a few yards sat the man whom he had again and again maligned; neither did Ella Bedford divine that a pair of blood-shot eyes were gazing upon her almost fiercely, as she turned from time to time to respond to the remarks of Max, who talked on, till, towards the end of the opera, he stood up to direct his opera-glass here and there, for indulgence in that graceful, truly refined, nineteenth-century act, so much in vogue at the higher-class places of entertainment.

He had tried in three or four different directions; but, perhaps from being in a satirical mood, he did not see a single face to attract his attention, till, concluding with a grand sweep of the best tier, he suddenly stopped short, kept the glass tightly to his eyes, whisked round swiftly, and sat down; for the field of the glass had for the mo-

ment been filled by the figures of Mrs. Bray and Sir Philip Vining.

‘Bai Jove!’ muttered Max to himself; and had Charley Vining and Laura been there all the evening, close behind him? They must have been, and be sitting now at the back of the private box. Bai Jove! what should he do? It was horrible to have gone so far—so near—and then to have all spoiled! What an ass he must have been! Laura had said that they were going out; but who would have thought that they were coming here?

Max sat rigidly still for the rest of the evening, encouraging Mrs. Marter to stay through the ballet; and at last, cautiously peering round, he found, to his great satisfaction, that the private box occupied by the Brays was empty.

Ella had not seen who was so near, for she was calm and unmoved.

‘Bai Jove, what an escape!’ thought Max; and a cold chill ran through him—one that would have been more icy, had he known how close they had been to a *rencontre*. But there was still another peril—Charley Vining might be waiting yet, and she would see him!

They reached the fly, however, uninterrupted, and Max Bray’s spirits rose; but, though he stayed to a late meal—half-tea, half-supper—at Crescent Villas, he was more distant than ever in his behaviour to Ella—so distant, indeed, that Mrs. Marter was half-disposed to ask him if Miss Bedford had given him any offence.

It was past one when Max departed; and, hardly knowing why, Ella went to her bed that night tearful and sad, little thinking that it was a pillow she would never again press.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BEARER OF TIDINGS.

NINE o'clock the next—or rather, by the way in which we calculate time, calling by the same title the hours of obscurity and those of sunshine, the same—morning, Mr. and Mrs. Marter were not down, nor likely to be for some time; but Ella was just rising from the schoolroom breakfast-table, where she had partaken of a pleasant meal of extremely weak tea, sweetened with moist sugar of a fine treaclely odour, and thick bread, plastered with rank, tubby, salt butter. The meal had gone off more quietly than usual,—no one had upset any tea, neither had the youngest child turned her delicate hand and arm, as was much

her custom, into a catapult, for the purpose of hurling bread-and-butter at her sisters. Certainly, this young lady had made one snatch at the butter, lying lumpy and yellow upon a plate, and had succeeded in grasping it, as was shown by the traces of her fingers; but when admonished therefor, and threatened with long tasks, she had only howled for five minutes, and had not, as was her wont, thrown herself upon her back upon the floor, and screamed until she was black in the face.

‘Mr. Bray wants to see you, miss,’ said a housemaid, entering the schoolroom, the footman not being dressed at so early an hour.

‘To see me?’ ejaculated Ella.

‘Yes, miss; he says he wants to see *you* pertickler, and he’s now waiting in the dining-room.’

‘Is Mrs. Marter down yet?’ said Ella,

troubled at this unusual call, and at such a strange hour.

‘No, miss ; nor won’t be for long enough.’

‘Ask Mr. Bray if he would be kind enough to call again at twelve,’ said Ella, after a few moments’ thought. ‘I am engaged now with the children.’

‘Yes, miss,’ said the girl ; and she departed, to return at the end of five minutes, with a card bearing in pencil :

‘If you value your peace of mind, come to me. I have a letter for you from the country. A case of life or death !’

‘Mrs. Brandon must be ill,’ thought Ella ; and hurriedly leaving the room, she stood the next minute face to face with Max, who was very pale, as he respectfully held out his hand, which was, however, unnoticed.

‘Miss Bedford,’ he said softly, ‘I fear that my visits have always been associated with that which was to you unpleasant, from the fact, though, that you did not know my real nature. This visit will, I fear, be only another that shall add to the dislike you entertain for me, but which of late you have so kindly disguised.’

Ella did not speak, but stood watching him eagerly.

‘You know I was late home last night. I found there this letter, delivered evidently by the late post, and you will guess my emotion when you read it. I came back here; but I could not get a cab, and it was half-past two when I reached the house. If I had roused you, nothing could have been done, while now a calm night’s rest has made you better prepared. So I returned to lie down upon the sofa for a few hours’ rest, meaning to be here as soon as the

house was opened; but — I am almost ashamed to tell it—I slept heavily from the effects of my long walk, and did not wake till eight. Can you bear to read it?’ he said gently.

‘Yes, yes,’ cried Ella huskily; and she took a formal-looking letter, that had evidently been hurriedly torn open. She glanced at the address — to ‘Maximilian Bray, Esq., 109 Bury-street, St. James’s, London.’ The post-mark, two days old, Penzance, while the London mark was of the day before. ‘Am I to read this?’ she said, without raising her eyes.

‘Yes,’ he said gently; and he turned away from her, but only to go to the mantelpiece and cover his eyes with his hands, where it was quite possible that he might have been able to see, by means of the mirror, every act of the trembling girl.

Ella drew out a folded letter from the

envelope, when a smaller one fell to the ground, addressed to her in the same hand as that in which the larger letter was written.

The characters seemed to run together as she opened this second envelope, took out a little folded note in another hand, read it, and then for a few moments the room seemed to swim round. But by an effort she mastered her emotion, re-read the note, and then hastily perused the letter through and through before doubling both together, and standing white and trembling, clutching the papers tightly as she gazed straight before her at vacancy.

There was no cry, no display of wild excitement; nothing but those white quivering lips and the drawn despairing look, to show the agony suffered by that heart, till she started back, as it were, into life, when Max turned softly and stood before her.

‘Miss Bedford,’ he said gently, ‘I will not trouble you with words of commiseration. I must go now to make preparations.’

‘Preparations?’ she said, as if not understanding his remark.

‘Yes; preparations. I telegraphed to Lexville as I came; and now I must go, for I shall run down by the express. There will be no time saved if I start earlier.’

‘You are going?’ said Ella dreamily.

‘Yes,’ he said almost angrily, ‘of course! Do you take me to be utterly devoid of feeling? But you will write, and I will be the bearer.’

‘Write!’ said Ella, with a wild hysterical sob—‘write!’

‘Yes. Surely you will do that,’ he said anxiously.

‘Heaven help me!’ cried Ella. ‘I must go.’

‘You will go?’ he said excitedly.

‘Yes,’ she said, with a strange dreamy look; ‘it is my fate. I must go.’

‘Ella — Miss Bedford — will you trust me?’ said Max in an earnest voice. ‘Leave matters to me, and I will arrange all. But Mrs. Marter will object to your leaving.’

‘I must go,’ said Ella, who seemed to be speaking as if under some strange influence.

‘You will go in spite of her wishes?’ said Max.

‘Yes, yes; I must go,’ said Ella huskily; and raising her hands to her face, she would have left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

HOVERING ROUND THE SNARE.

‘STOP, stop!’ said Max hoarsely. ‘We must have no scene with that weak woman. I will be in waiting by the park entrance of the Colosseum with a cab at four. Meet me there. The train leaves Paddington at 4.50. But do you hear me?’

‘Yes,’ she said, speaking as if in a dream.

‘Do you understand? At the Colosseum at four, without fail.’

‘Yes,’ said Ella again abstractedly, as he held her cold hand in his, her face being turned towards the door.

‘But mind this,’ he said, ‘this is no time for child’s-play. If you are not there

soon after the time named, I must catch the train, and I dare not wait. If you are not there, I go alone!’

‘Do you think I could fail?’ said Ella, turning upon him her sweet candid countenance. ‘I will be there.’

Was Max Bray ashamed of his face, that he held it down as he hurried from the house? Perhaps not; but he was evidently much excited, for he muttered half aloud, as if running over certain plans that he had arranged for a particular end.

‘Could it be right? Was it all true?’ Ella asked herself, when alone in her bedroom, with the sense of a deep unutterable misery crushing her; and once more she read the letters she had retained.

‘O yes, it was too true, too true! But what was she about to do? To accompany the man she mistrusted, the man she

dreaded? He had been trusted, though, before now; and of late, too, his conduct had been so different—he had even seemed to dislike her. Still, under any other circumstances, she would not have gone; but at such a time, in answer to such an appeal, how could she stay?’

Her brain was in a whirl, and she could not reason quietly. She only knew now the depth of love she felt, and urged by that love, everything else seemed little and of no import.

Hours must have passed, when, after sending twice to Mrs. Marter, she received that lady’s gracious permission to wait upon her.

‘I should have sent for you before long—as soon as I felt that I could bear it, Miss Bedford,’ said Mrs. Marter—‘to demand some explanation of your receiving visitors early in the morning without my consent.

I understand that somewhere about seven o'clock—'

'I believe the clock had struck nine,' said Ella quietly.

'Seven, or eight, or nine, or ten, it's all the same!' exclaimed Mrs. Marter angrily. 'Pray, Miss Bedford, what did Mr. Bray want here this morning? Was it supposed that I should not know of the visit?'

'Mr. Bray came to tell me of the illness of a very dear friend,' said Ella pitifully; 'and now I come to ask your consent to absent myself for a few days.'

'Of course, I might have known that that was coming! Certainly not, Miss Bedford! And until I have communicated with Mrs. Brandon, I desire you do not leave the house. What next, I wonder?'

'Mr. Bray brought me letters. It is a matter of life and death!' said Ella ear-

nestly. 'Surely, madam, in such a case you will not refuse me?'

'And pray who is it that is ill?' said Mrs. Marter sneeringly.

Ella was silent. She could not have spoken then, in spite of every effort, even to have saved her life.

'I can see through it all! I am not blind!' exclaimed Mrs. Marter. 'I shall certainly not give my consent, Miss Bedford. It is a planned affair, and I have been deceived. Now leave the room.'

Ella would have spoken, but she felt that it would have been without avail; and hurrying out, she once more sought her own chamber.

What did Mrs. Marter mean? What was planned? Impossible! She had the proof in those letters. And once more she read them with beating heart before asking

herself whether she would be doing right or wrong.

What had she promised? To meet Max Bray at four—to trust herself to his guidance. What had she to fear? Surely scheming baseness could never go so low! But it was absurd! She had those letters, and did she not know the handwriting?

She examined her purse. The store was slender, but not so small as of old. Then she prepared a few necessaries in a small travelling-bag before referring again and again to the time, which seemed to lag slowly by, as she pictured scene after scene of misery and death, till she seated herself at a table, and rested her aching throbbing brow upon her hands.

About two o'clock a message came from Mrs. Marter to know why she did not attend the young ladies' dinner; when, starting up, she descended, matters of the pre-

sent having quite escaped her in the rush of terrible thoughts which swept through her brain.

She went through her duties mechanically, hurrying back as soon as she possibly could to her room, and dressed for a journey; when standing, bag in hand, ready, and waiting for the appointed hour, now very near at hand, a strange nervous dread began to oppress her—a cold shivering sense of evil, which made her hands feel damp and cold, and her lips hot, parched, and dry.

Twenty times over she was about to tear off her things and give up, but her hand seemed to go mechanically to her breast, when a touch of those letters strengthened her resolve. She felt then that she must go—something was drawing her that she could not resist. But again began the shrinking, and each time to be

struggled with till the dread was beaten; and at last, waking from a wild, nervous, excited struggle between strength and indecision, Ella found that the hour was long past, and, bag in hand, she fled down the stairs.

‘Miss Bedford—Miss Bedford!’ screamed a passionate voice as she passed the drawing-room. But, with face pale and eyes fixed, Ella seemed to be walking in her sleep, or labouring under the stupor produced by some narcotic; for she passed on, heedless of the call—one hand holding the travelling-bag, the other clasping the letters, which acted as a talisman to nerve her in each sore time of shrinking.

The poison was working well. But in the passage she stayed for an instant, hesitating. What step was she taking? Where would this end?

A cold shudder passed through her;

but once more she was drawn on against her will, her better sense, and the powers that should have withheld her.

Another moment and her hand was on the fastening of the door; and for the last time she paused, hung back for an instant, and would have returned, when her hand again pressed the letters. She uttered a feeble wailing cry as her lips formed a name, and then, opening the door, she stood upon the steps as if hesitating; but the portal swung to, and fastened itself with a loud snap; and fully feeling now that she had taken the step, she drew down her veil and hurried over the distance that lay between her and the Colosseum, suffering from a new dread.

The step taken, she felt now nerved for any contingency, and recalling Max Bray's words, she reproached herself for her delay.

What had he said? If she were not there, he would go alone!

She almost ran now over the pathway till she caught sight of a cab.

Was that the one, or had he gone? Was she too late?

Yes, she was too late, she told herself, for he was not there; but the next moment, giddy with excitement, she felt her hand seized, the bag taken from her, the banging of a cab-door; when, as a voice exclaimed, 'At last!' there was a noise of wheels, and she felt that she was being hurried through the streets.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE GIN OF THE FOWLER.

‘I WAS afraid that you would not come, Miss Bedford,’ said Max respectfully. ‘You look pale and ill.’

Ella could not answer, when, seeing her agitation, her companion forbore to speak, but kept on consulting his watch. Now he pulled down the front window to tell the driver to hasten; now he drew it up again, but only five minutes after, to tell the man to slacken his pace, till, apparently annoyed at the interruptions, the driver settled down into a quiet regular trot, out of which neither the threats nor exhortations of his fare could move him.

In one of his movements, Max dropped

a note from his breast-pocket, as he knocked down Ella's reticule, which flew open; but gathering up the escaped contents, he replaced them for her, and with them his own letter, when closing the snap, he handed the reticule back to her, saying,

‘There is nothing lost, Miss Bedford.’

He was quite right; but for Ella there was much gained.

‘We shall lose the train!’ now exclaimed Max excitedly. ‘Bai Jove, we shall! and when one had got so near too!’

Then he once more shouted at the driver to hasten; but in vain. At last, though, as they reached Paddington, Max referred again to his watch, his face flushing the while with excitement, as he exclaimed,

‘We shall be just right, after all!’

Then, in what seemed a dream of excited haste, Ella felt herself dragged from

the cab—there was the loud ringing of a bell; the rattling of money; Max's voice adjuring the porter to hasten with their little luggage; and then, profoundly ignorant that Charley Vining was within a few yards, Ella felt herself half lifted into a first-class carriage, where she sank back amongst the cushions as the door banged; and, as if to increase her giddiness, the train glided past walls, empty carriages, signal-posts, engine-houses, and then over a maze of switches and points—farther and farther each moment, off and away with a wild scream down the main line.

‘Hard fought for, but gained!’ muttered Max Bray, as he stooped down to conceal the look of triumph which overspread his countenance; and in that attitude he remained for fully half an hour, when, carefully arranging rug and wrapper for his companion's comfort, he once more

leaned back, drew forth a paper, and answering one or two attempts made by fellow-passengers to commence conversation with a bow of the head, he appeared to read.

And for Ella?

Giddiness and excitement, the rattle of the train, the flashing of the lights of stations they dashed by as night came on, and then a stoppage, and a voice called out, 'Reading!' Then on again, giddiness and excitement and the rattle of the train seeming to form itself into one deep voice, the burden of whose song was always telling her to hasten onward, till in the dim light of the ill-lit carriage, she felt ready at times to start forward and ask if any one had called. Then it seemed in the darkness as if the train was rapidly going back, at a time when she was hungering to get to her journey's end.

Max sat back, silent and thoughtful,

opposite to her, apparently without taking the slightest heed ; but once or twice it seemed to her that she caught sight of a flashing eye.

There were two more passengers in the same compartment ; but after the first attempt at conversation, they subsided into their corners, and not a word was spoken.

Another slackening of the swift express, after thundering along for another many miles' run, and still Ella feared no evil ; but as Max roused himself and threw aside wrappers, she evinced her readiness to follow him.

‘Swindon!’ he said. ‘Just upon seven. We had better have a little refreshment here, for it is one of the best places we shall pass till we get to Exeter at 10.20. Take my arm, Miss Bedford?’

‘Thank you,’ said Ella ; ‘but I cannot—I would rather not have any refreshment.’

‘It is absolutely necessary,’ he said firmly. ‘You have a very long journey before you, and unless you prepare for it, you will be totally unfit to get through it all. Let me draw this closer round your throat.’

Quiet gentlemanly attentions, kind consideration, great respect. Was this the Max Bray of old? Ella was ready to ask herself, as she suffered him to draw her cloak more tightly round her; and then, taking advantage of the ten minutes’ law allowed, he pressed upon her refreshments, every mouthful of which was as gall and ashes between her lips.

More giddiness and excitement, the clanging of a bell, and they were once more in their places. There was the guard’s shrill whistle, the engine’s shriek, and then again the rattle of the train forcing itself into adjuring words, bidding her ‘hasten on—

hasten on!' or she would be too late; and then out once more in the darkness, rushing on with a wild thundering speed, away dashed the train, whirling up dust, dead leaf, or scrap of straw, and casting each fragment away, as the very earth quivered beneath the weight of the huge load. And still again came that strange sense of the engine now standing still, now reversing its action, so that they were hurrying once more back towards town.

'Hasten on—hasten on! Too late—too late!' The words kept repeating themselves to her excited imagination; and to relieve herself from the apprehensive feelings engendered, she tried to gaze out of the window; but all was darkness. She glanced round the compartment. The two passengers were evidently asleep, and for the first time now since they had started, a shiver of dread came over her, as her eyes

rested for a moment on Max, who, leaning back, silent and reserved, was evidently watching her every movement.

But she drove away the fancy that troubled her, and sat trying to picture the scene she would soon be called upon to witness, and a sigh of misery and despair tore from her breast.

And still on and on, hour after hour, till, well on their journey, Exeter was reached. A five minutes' stay made, and then they glided out of the great station, and into the darkness once more. Half-past ten now, and nearly two more hours to travel before Plymouth would be reached—the extent of their journey for that night.

There were three other passengers in the train this time; but a movement upon the part of Max Bray now troubled her. It was a mere trifle, but the slightest act was likely to arouse her distrust; and, as he

changed his seat from opposite to her side, she involuntarily shrank away, when he immediately returned, folded his arms, and sat watching her.

And now more than ever came upon her the thoughts of the extent of the step she had taken, oppressing her terribly, till, as if seeking relief, she began to repeat the words of the letter placed in her hands that day.

CHAPTER XVII.

AID WHERE UNEXPECTED.

‘HASTEN on—hasten on!’ The rattle of the train still repeating those words, and Ella’s heart sinking, as they sped through the darkness; for still, in spite of her struggle with reason, it would seem as if they were ever going back. Her brain seemed at times unable to support the stress placed upon it—the excitement more than she could bear.

She gazed out upon the black night, but only to see in the dim breath-blurred glass the interior of the carriage reproduced, with the dark-blue cloth padding, the silent passengers, the globe lamp, and Max Bray seated opposite, with his eyes glittering as

if ready to spring at her each instant. She could at any moment have succumbed, become weak and helpless, and trembled at her forlorn condition; but the brave spirit held up, although incipient fever was claiming her for its own, and a strange unnatural throbbing in the pulses of her temple told where the peril lay.

Plymouth at last!—the train's resting-place for the night; and again quiet and thoughtful, Max engaged a fly, wrapper and luggage were placed therein, and, quiet and gentlemanlike, he talked to her till they reached one of the principal hotels, where Ella gladly sought her chamber, and tried to find in sleep the relief from the mental strain she so sadly needed.

But all through the early hours of that wintry morning came to torture her the endless repetition of those words: 'Hasten on—hasten on!' while her burning head

seemed chained to the pillow by links heated to redness.

Again and again she started up, to gaze round the dark room, thinking that a voice whose tones she so well remembered was calling her ; but, with a sigh, she sank back once more, to doze and listen in her sleep to the endless warning, ‘Hasten on—hasten on!’

She descended to breakfast pale, restless, and excited. She could not eat, though pressed again and again by Max, who was gentle and attentive, asking with every show of consideration respecting her health.

‘I have made all arrangements and inquiries,’ he said, ‘and been down to the station this morning. Our train leaves at ten.’

‘Not till ten?’ she said in a disappointed tone.

He smiled as he drew forth his watch.

‘It is half-past nine now,’ he said. ‘We

have only time to get comfortably down to the station.'

Ella rose and left the room, to return in a few minutes ready to continue the journey; but during her absence, Max had placed a letter in the waiter's hand, with an accompanying half-sovereign.

'To be posted in a week's time,' were the instructions.

'More wrecks down in the bay,' said Max, as Ella reëntered the room. 'It has been a sad winter!'

'Let us—let us—hasten on,' she said with an effort; and leading her out, they were soon in the station, and secured their seats in an empty compartment, where Ella took her place by the window, to gaze abstractedly out at the damp sodden landscape for quite an hour.

'Have we far to go now?' she asked of Max, who sat watching her.

‘Not much farther,’ he said.

And again she asked that question at the end of an hour, and of another hour, but always to receive the same answer.

‘Is it not less than a hundred miles from Plymouth to Penzance?’ she at length asked uneasily.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘but you are travelling now upon a line of rail where stoppages are frequent and there is no speed. Bai Jove, though, they ought to be prosecuted for dawdling so.’

Max smiled as he said those words, for his plan was nearly ripe; and that smile was not lost upon his companion. But she said nothing, only sat there pale, excited, and watchful till another hour had elapsed, during which time the well-fee’d guard had not intruded another passenger.

But this could not last for ever. One moment silent and watchful, the next mo-

ment with the full conviction of how she had been betrayed upon her, Ella Bedford sprang up and tried to open the door, the train dashing along at the rate of forty miles an hour.

There was a strong pair of hands upon her wrists, though, in an instant, and she was forced back into her seat.

‘Silly child!’ exclaimed Max, with an insolent laugh. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘We are going back!’ exclaimed Ella, struggling to free herself.

‘Well, not exactly,’ he said, laughing, and now throwing off all disguise.

‘Where are you taking me?’ she exclaimed.

‘O, only into North Wales, my trembling little dove,’ laughed Max, as he held his captive firmly in her place. ‘Now look here, little one: every dog has his day. It

is mine now, and I mean to make use of it. You have braved and jilted me long enough, and it is my turn now. There, you need not struggle; it is of no use. Let's quietly look at the state of affairs. What have you done? Well, you've made an excuse to Mrs. Marter, something about going to see a sick friend, and, *bai Jove*—not to put too fine a point on it—you have eloped with me, Maximilian Bray. I've no doubt our dear friend Mrs. Marter has sent word of it to Mrs. Brandon by this time. Mrs. Brandon will tell the Brays of Lexville, when Mrs. Bray will be shocked, and my beloved papa will no doubt leave me his curse; but, all the same, the Vinings will hear all about it. My plan took a long time hatching, but, now it is hatched, it cuts double-edged.'

'Will you loose my wrists?' cried Ella faintly, 'or am I to call for assistance?'

‘O, call if you like, my love; bai Jove, as much as you like! only you may save yourself the trouble, for no one will hear you. What!’ he cried, laughing, ‘can the little gentle dove turn savage, and ruffle her plumes and peck? Come, now, what is the use of being vicious? You have thrown away that delicate little gossamer dress that ladies call fame, so why not say pleasantly, “My dear Maximilian, let us be married at once, and live happy ever after”? No, it’s of no use; you are not going to jump out on to the line to be broken up. I value you too much; and as I told you before, it is of no use to scream. There’s no dear Charley Vining to come to your help, for he is too busy with his *fiancée*, my sweet sister Laura. Now, come, sit still and listen. Are you going to be reasonable? It’s of no use to be angry because I brought you off so cleverly; and

bear in mind that I have been waiting months upon months, with the patience of half-a-dozen Jobs, to bring this plan from the most raw sourness to full ripening. Confound the girl! how strong she is! Bai Jove, Ella, you are a little Tartar!

Max Bray had talked on, and part of what he had said was understood; but no explanation was needed. Ella Bedford knew one thing—that she had been cruelly betrayed, and that she was in the hands of a brutal heartless libertine, who, under the guise of a gentleman, possessed a nature blacker than that of the lowest rough in London.

He spoke on, holding her wrists pinioned as he did so; but despair and the fever fire in her blood gave her strength, and twice over it was only by a desperate struggle that he was able to prevent her from dashing herself through the open window.

She did not cry out, feeling that it would be useless; but her struggles to escape from his pinioning hands were frantic, till there came a warning shriek from the engine. The train drew up at a platform, and as Max started back into his seat, the carriage-door opened, and Ella Bedford fainted.

‘Taken ill,’ said Max in explanation. ‘Half mad, bai Jove! Hard work to keep her from dashing out of the window. Most painful thing.’

‘Friend or stranger?’ said the newcomer, suspiciously watching the countenance of Max.

‘Friend or stranger!’ said Max. ‘Bai Jove, that’s cool. My wife—travelling for pleasure.’

‘I beg pardon, I’m sure,’ said the stranger; ‘but I should certainly alight at the next station. Your pleasure-travel is over,

sir, and you must get all the medical aid you can, for your lady is in a high state of fever.'

'Fever!' cried Max, involuntarily shrinking.

'Yes,' said the other, with a look of contempt. 'But you need not fear, sir; I should say it is the brain. The lady has evidently suffered from some severe mental strain.'

'Bai Jove!' ejaculated Max; 'are you a doctor?'

'No, sir; only an old Indian officer; but I have seen sufficient illness to know a case of fever when I see one.'

'Bai Jove!' exclaimed Max again; and then he sat helpless and frowning, while the stranger laid back the poor girl's head that she might breathe more freely, and half supported her till they reached the next stopping station, where she was transferred

to a fly, and conveyed, under the care of Max Bray, to the nearest hotel.

There is no difficulty in obtaining a doctor in a country town, and it was not long before one was by the sofa upon which Ella had been laid.

‘Well,’ said Max, after five minutes’ examination, ‘what’s to be done?’

‘Send for a nurse, and have Mrs.—Mrs.—I beg pardon, what name did you say?’

‘Williams,’ said Max.

‘To be sure—Williams,’ said the doctor; ‘and let Mrs. Williams be at once conveyed to bed. She will have to be carefully tended and watched.’

‘Fit to travel again to-morrow, I suppose?’ said Max. ‘Come, now, no professional dodging.’

‘To-morrow two months,’ said the doctor sharply, ‘perhaps;’ and then he looked anything but pleasantly at Max.

‘What!’ exclaimed Max viciously. ‘Bai Jove, you don’t mean that!’

‘I mean, sir,’ said the doctor seriously, ‘that your lady is in a dangerous state, and I would not answer for her life if she were moved. I’ll do my best, and we must be hopeful for what is to follow.’

‘Bai Jove!’ ejaculated Max, as he left the room; and sympathising hands were soon busy with the insensible form.

‘Mrs. Williams, eh?’ said the doctor to himself, as he superintended a portion of the arrangements; and then left to get some medicine made up. ‘Mrs. Williams, eh? But, poor child, she does not travel in her wedding-ring!’

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN OVERTAXED BRAIN.

‘IT was doosed unfortunate, bai Jove!’ Max Bray said to himself, as he sat over his dinner at the snug little hotel at the end of the third day. He could not think what the foolish girl wanted to excite herself for to such an extent. It was absurd, ‘bai Jove, it was!’ But his plan had answered all the same, and he’d wait till she got well, if it were a month first—he would, ‘bai Jove!’ She’d come round then, with a little quiet talking to; and, after all, they were snug and out of sight in the little town, and nobody knew them, nor was likely to know them, that was the beauty of it. Certainly he could not get his let-

ters; but that did not matter: they were sure to be all dunning affairs, and he'd not the slightest wish to have them. The only thing he regretted was not hearing from Laura.

One thing, he said, was very evident—Ella must have been ill when they started, or this attack would never have come on so suddenly.

And all this while, burning with fever, Ella Bedford lay delirious, and with a nurse at her bedside night and day. The doctor was unremitting in his attention, and was undoubtedly skilful; but he soon found that all he could do was to palliate, for the disease would run its course. The place they were in was fortunately kept by a quiet old couple, whose sympathies were aroused by the sufferings of the gentle girl; and though, as a rule, sick visitors are not welcomed very warmly at hotels,

here Ella met with almost motherly treatment.

Doctor, nurse, landlady—all had their suspicions; but the ravings of a fever-stricken girl were not sufficient warranty for them to do more than patiently watch the progress of events, and at times they anticipated that the end would be one that they could not but deplore.

For Ella indeed seemed sick unto death, and lay tossing her fevered head on the pillow, or struggled to get away to give the help that she said was needed of her.

‘Hasten on, hasten on!’ Those words were always ringing in her ears, and troubling her; and then she would start up in bed, press her long glorious hair back from her burning temples, and listen as if called.

Then would come a change, and she would be talking to an imaginary flower,

as she plucked its petals out one by one, calling each petal a hope or aspiration; whispering too, at times, in a voice so low that it was never heard by those who bent over her, what seemed to be a name, while a smile of ineffable joy swept over her lips as she spoke.

Once more, though, those words, 'Hasten on, hasten on!' repeated incessantly as she struggled to free herself from the hands that held her to her bed.

'Let me go to him,' she whispered softly once to her nurse. 'He is dying, and he calls me. Let me see him once, only for a few minutes, that I may tell him how I loved him, before he goes. Please let me go!' she said pitifully, clasping her hands together; 'just to see him once, and then I will go away—far away—and try to be at peace.'

'My poor child, yes,' sobbed the land-

lady. 'I fear you will, and very soon too. But does she want him from downstairs? I'll go and fetch him up.'

The landlady descended, to find Max, as usual, smoking, and told him of what had passed.

'Bai Jove, no! I won't come up, thanks. I'm nervous, and have a great dread of infection, and that sort of thing.'

'But 't isn't an infectious disorder, sir,' said the landlady; 'and I'm afraid, sir, that if you don't come now—'

'Eh, what? I say, bai Jove, you don't mean that it's serious!' exclaimed Max excitedly. 'There's no danger of *that*, is there?'

The landlady smoothed down her apron with a solemn look in her face; then left the room, with genuine tears of sorrow stealing down her cheeks.

'Poor young creature!' she sighed. 'Such a mere girl too!'

And then she hurried back to the sick-chamber, to find Ella lying back in a state of exhaustion.

Another day, another, and another, with life seeming to hang as by a thread ; while Max, strictly avoiding the sick-chamber, waited anxiously for the result ; for this was an accident upon which, with all his foresight, he had not calculated. But he could obtain no comfort from doctor or nurse. Their looks grew more and more ominous, and at last he began to calculate upon what would be his position, should the worst come to the worst. Certainly, he had by deception — a stratagem, he termed it—induced Ella Bedford to place herself under his protection, and if she died it would be in the doctor's hands. There would be no coroner's inquest, and the law could not touch him. And besides, she had no relatives to call him to account, while

surely—he smiled gravely as he thought it—*his brother-in-law* would say nothing!

But all the same, in his heart of hearts. Max Bray knew that, if Ella died, he would be morally guilty of her murder.

That last was an ugly word, but it insisted upon being spoken, to afterwards ring again and again in his ears as he restlessly moved in his seat.

But now a change had taken place in Ella's state. From the soft appealing prayer for leave to go and answer the calls she fancied that she heard, she now became fiercely excited, moved by a dread of pursuit, and shrinking from every one [who approached her. She would even wildly inveigh against the doctor, whom she accused of being in the pay of Max to drag her away.

No more soft appeals now, but frantic shrieks and fierce struggles for freedom.

Again and again those who watched found that she had taken advantage of a few minutes' absence to dress hurriedly, when it was only by a gentle application of force that she could be overcome.

Then came the time when she seemed to have fallen into a weak and helpless state, lying day after day apparently devoid of sense and feeling.

Max was asked again and again whether he would see her; but he invariably refused with a coward's shiver of dread, to the great disgust of all who had taken interest in the poor girl's state.

'I declare, it's scandalous!' said the landlady in confidence to her husband. 'He seems to neither know nor care how she is. No relatives are sent to, he has no letters; and it's my belief there's more than we know hanging to this.'

''Tisn't our business to interfere,' said

the landlord. 'He pays like a gentleman, if he isn't one; and if we get our living by visitors, it isn't for us to be playing the spy upon them.'

The landlady did not say anything, but she evidently thought a great deal. The doctor, too, had his opinion upon the subject, but he was silent, and tended his patient to the best of his ability, shaking his head when questioned as to her recovery.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NET BREAKS.

THERE is a boundary even to human patience; and now, after many days, Max Bray began to find his position very irksome. There was every probability of Ella's being a long and tedious illness, succeeded by a very slow return to convalescence; and he sat, at length, one day thinking matters over, for he was thoroughly tired out. There were no amusements in the place, and not wishing to attract curiosity, he had kept himself closely within doors. It was tiresome to a degree, and, besides, his stock of money would not last for ever. Come what might, he felt that he could put up with his position no longer. To a great

extent his stratagem had been successful; but this unforeseen illness had made it now a failure, and he might as well give up and go to London. It had been expensive certainly; but though he was a loser, some one else would gain enormously; and he grinned again and again as he softly rubbed his white hands together, and thought of what a banker that some one would in the future prove. She would never be able to refuse him money, however extravagant he might be, and fortunately the Vinings were enormously wealthy. 'But, *bai Jove!*' said Max Bray half aloud, 'what a sweet thing is love between brother and sister!'

Then Mr. Maximilian Bray began to make his plans for the future. He told himself that time enough had elapsed; that he need not certainly give up Ella, but arrange with the landlord that he should be informed directly she was getting better,

and then he could come down again—that could be easily managed—and he really was tired out of this. He also made a few other plans; building, too, a few more castles in the air, ending with the determination of going up to town by the first train in the morning, and getting to know how Laura's affair was progressing.

‘At all events, her way's clear,’ said Max, ‘and, *bai Jove*, she shall pay me for it by and by.’

‘*L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.*’ Max Bray arranged all future matters to his entire satisfaction, but again there were contingencies that he could not foresee. Sitting there, rolling his cigar in his mouth and reckoning how long it would be to lunch, he had made up his mind to dine the next day at his club; but he did not; neither did other matters turn out quite so satisfactorily as he wished.

The sojourn was at a quiet little hotel in a Gloucestershire town that it is unnecessary to name; suffice it if we say that, save on the weekly market-day, the streets, with two exceptions, were silent and deserted; the two exceptions being the time when the children were set free from the National Schools. Hence, then, any little noise or excitement was unusual, and it was no wonder that Max Bray was startled by a scream above stairs, a cry for help, and the trampling of feet; sounds which his coward heart soon interpreted for him to mean an awful termination to his 'stratagem,' when, rising hurriedly to his feet, he stood there resting one hand upon the table, and the cold perspiration standing in great drops upon his pallid face.

There were people coming towards his room—they were coming to tell him. 'What of it, then?' he cried savagely. 'Could he

help it? Had no doctor been obtained? It was her own mad excitement led to this termination.'

'O, sir! O, sir!' exclaimed the landlady, bursting tearful-eyed into the room, 'your poor, dear, sweet lady!'

'Dead?' asked Max in a harsh whisper, his knees shaking beneath him as he spoke.

'No, sir, not dead. I only left her for a few minutes, and when I came back—'

'Well, what? Speak, woman!' cried Max fiercely.

'She was gone, sir.'

Max Bray stood for a minute as if stunned, and then leaping at the woman he shook her savagely, before he started off to make inquiries.

'Had any one seen her?' 'No, not a soul.' But her clothes that she had worn the day she was borne insensible to the

hotel were gone, as was also her little leather reticule-bag.

Where could she have gone?

Only one place could strike Max Bray, as he thought of what she would do if sense had returned, and she had mastered her weakness sufficiently to enable her to steal from the house unobserved. There was only one place that she could seek with the intention of fleeing from him, and that was the railway station.

‘Was their life to be bound up somehow with railways?’ he asked himself as he started off in the direction of the station. ‘Bai Jove!’ he seemed to have been always either meeting or inquiring about her at booking-offices; but why had she not been better watched?

Why indeed, unless it was that a chance might be given her for seeking freedom. But the landlady’s few minutes had been

a full hour, and, as if in her sleep, Ella had slowly risen, dressed for a journey, taken her reticule in her hand, her shawl over her arm, and then, drawing down her veil, walked—unseen, unchallenged—from the house, and, as if guided by instinct, gone straight to the station.

A train was nearly due—a fast train—and still in the same quiet way she applied for a through ticket to London, took her change and walked out on to the platform, to stand there perfectly motionless and fixed of eye.

No one heeded her of the few who were waiting, no one spoke; and at last came the faint and distant sound of the panting train, nearer, nearer, nearer.

Would she escape, or would she be stayed before she could take her place?

It might have been thought that she would feel, if not betray, some excitement;

but no; she stood motionless, not even seeming to hear the coming train: it was as though she were moved by some power independent of her own will.

There was the ringing of the bell, the altering of a distance signal, and the train gliding up to the platform, as a farming-looking man drew the attention of another to a gentleman running swiftly a quarter of a mile down the road.

‘He’ll be too late, safe.’

‘Ah!’ said the other. ‘And they won’t wait for him; for they’re very particular here since the row was made about the accident being through the bad time-keeping of the trains.’

‘Look at him, how he’s waving his hat!’ said the first speaker. ‘He’s running too, and no mistake. Why, it’s that dandy swell fellow that’s staying at Linton’s, where his wife’s ill.’

‘Serve him right too,’ said the other. ‘Why wasn’t he in better time? Those swells are always behindhand.’

‘Now then, all going on!’ cried a voice; and the two men stepped into a second-class carriage, against the door of which, and looking towards the booking-office, Ella was already seated, cold, fixed, and apparently perfectly insensible to what was going on.

‘Cold day, miss,’ said the man who took his seat opposite to her; but there was no reply, and the next moment the man’s attention was caught by what took place at the booking-office door.

Max Bray dashed panting up as the guard sounded his whistle, but only to find the glass door fastened, when, evidently half wild with excitement, he beat at the panels, gesticulating furiously as he saw the train begin slowly to move, and Ella seated at one window.

She could have seen him too, for her face was turned towards him; she must have heard his cries for the door to be opened; but she did not start, she did not shrink back; and now, mad almost with rage and disappointment, Max Bray forgot all about telegraphs surpassing trains, everything, in the sight of his prize escaping from within his fingers; and for what? To expose his cruel duplicity.

It would be ruin, he felt, and he must reach her at all hazards.

Turning, then, from the door, he ran along by the station to where a wooden palisade bounded the platform, and as the train was slowly gliding by him, he climbed over to reach the ground before the carriage containing Ella had passed.

‘Stop him!’ shouted the station-master; and the guard, who had run and leaped into his van, stood pointing out the breaker of

rules as he paused for a few moments upon his step.

‘Here, hi! You’re too late, sir!’ roared a couple of porters running in pursuit; and as Max Bray leaped on to the door-step, and clung to the handle of the compartment with his face within a few inches of Ella’s, a porter’s hand was upon his arm; there was a shout, a curse, the words ‘Bai Jove!’ half uttered, and then the speaker felt his hands snatched from their hold; the next moment it was as though a fearful blow was struck him, and he and the porter were rolling upon the platform. But again there was a jerk, a wild shriek that froze the bystanders’ blood, and the form of one of the wrestlers was seen to be drawn down between the last carriage and the platform; the guard’s break passed on, and Max Bray lay motionless upon the line.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BIRD FLIES.

‘ HERE, let-down the window! Open the door! Good heavens, there’ll be some one killed! Let him be; we’ll get him in. Those porters are so officious, and they cause accidents, instead of preventing ’em. Let him be, I tell you, and report him afterwards. There, I thought so! They’ll be killed! Heaven help him—he’s down under one of the carriages!’

So cried one of Ella’s fellow-travellers as he witnessed the struggle from within, heedless, in his excitement, that not a word he uttered was heard by the actors in the thrilling scene. But as Max was caught by the carriage and dragged under

the train, the man threw open the window and leaned out as far as he could, to draw his head back after a few moments, and impart his intelligence to the pale figure close beside him.

‘I’m afraid he’s killed, miss!’

Still no answer. Ella neither heard nor saw, for this part of her life—from the time when Max caught her wrists in his, and till long after—was a void that her memory could never again people.

‘Deaf as a post, and a good thing too, poor lass!’ muttered the man as he again leaned out.

And now there was shouting, signalling, and the stopping of the train for a few minutes, long enough for the passengers to see a motionless form lifted from the line and borne into one of the waiting-rooms, the passenger who had watched the proceedings having leaped out, but now

coming panting back to reach his place as the signal for starting was once more given.

‘Is he much hurt?’ was eagerly asked by the other occupants of the carriage.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the passenger.

‘Not killed?’

‘No, I don’t think he’s killed. You see, he went down at the end of the platform just where it begins to slope. If it had been off the level, he must have been crushed to death in an instant. But I didn’t have above a quarter of a minute to see him.’

‘It’s very, very dangerous,’ observed one, ‘this trying to get into a train when it’s started.’

‘Very,’ said another; ‘but they will do it. That gentleman, too, was so determined, climbing over the fence; and I suppose that made the railway folks determined too.’

‘He must have been anxious to get off, or he would not have acted as he did.’

‘Some particular appointment or another, I should think.’

‘Well, poor fellow, I hope he is not badly injured,’ was the charitable wish now uttered, when a dissertation upon the right or wrong action of porters in trying to stop people ensued, it being generally accorded that the by-laws upon which they acted ought to be rescinded, and that the guard ought to report all breaches of the regulations at the next station.

And all these comments were made within Ella’s hearing, but without once diverting her steadfast stony gaze, as now, leaning back in her corner, she looked straight out at the flying landscape as mile after mile was passed.

Once or twice a remark was made to her, but she merely bent her head;

and at last she was allowed to remain unquestioned, unnoticed, as the train sped on swiftly towards the great metropolis.

She changed carriages mechanically when requested, and again and again produced her ticket, but always in the same dreamy strange way. Passengers came, and passengers went, some speaking, others paying no heed to their closely veiled and silent companion; but not once did Ella speak or evince any knowledge of what was passing around.

How that journey was performed, she never knew, nor by what strange influence she was guided in her acts; but press on she did, and to the end.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE COPSE-HALL GHOST.

‘I WONDER what’s become of Miss Bedford!’ said the cook at Mrs. Brandon’s, as she sat with her fellow-servants enjoying the genial warmth of the fire before retiring to rest.

It was about half-past ten, and, probably to soften Edward the hard, the stewpan was in use, and steaming mugs of hot spiced liquid were being from time to time applied to lips.

‘Married long before this, I should think,’ said the housemaid, tossing her head. ‘You don’t suppose she’s like some people I know, going on shilly-shallying year after year, as if they never meant to get married at all.’

‘Never you mind about that,’ said Edward gruffly ; ‘perhaps we shall get married when it suits us, and perhaps we sha’n’t. I don’t see no fun in going away from a good home and a good missus, to hard lines and spending all your savings, like some people as ain’t old enough to know better.’

‘Does missus ever talk about her, Mr. Eddard ?’ said Cook persuasively.

‘Not often,’ said Edward ; ‘but I know one thing,—she ain’t had a letter from her for ever so long, now.’

‘How do you know?’ said the housemaid.

‘How do I know?’ exclaimed Mr. Eddard contemptuously. ‘Why, don’t I see all the envelopes, and can’t I tell that way? But there’s something wrong about her, I believe ; for there came a letter about three weeks or a month ago, and it seemed

to cut missus up a good deal, and I heard her say something out aloud.'

'What did she say?' said Cook and Mary in a breath, for the recounter had stopped.

'Well, I didn't catch it all,' said Edward, speaking in his mug; 'but it was something like: "Gone with Mr. Bray? Impossible!"'

'But what made her say that?' exclaimed Cook.

'Why, from what she read in a letter from London, to be sure, stupid. Why else should she say it?'

'There, didn't I tell you so!' exclaimed Cook triumphantly.

'What are you up to now?' said Edward in a tone of gruff contempt. 'What do you mean?'

'Why, I always thought she'd have Mr. Bray, as was so wonderful attentive. Why,

Mrs. Pottles, down at the Seven Bells, has told me lots of times about how he used to come and put his horse up there, and then follow her about.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Edward. 'When did you see Mother Pottles last?'

'Yesterday,' said Cook. 'And she said she thought that Pottles would take the twenty pounds off the good-will, and—'

'Why didn't you tell me so before?' said Edward gruffly.

'Because she said Mr. Pottles would come over and see you, and you do snub me so for interfering.'

'Humph!' ejaculated Edward again.

'What, you are going to have the Seven Bells, then?' said the housemaid. 'O, I am glad; it will be nice! And you're going to be married, after all.'

'Don't you be in a hurry,' growled Edward. 'We ain't gone yet, and perhaps we

sha'n't go at all ; so now then. There goes the bell ; now, then, clear off. Missus is going to bed.'

'Did you fasten the side-door, Mr. Ed-dard ?' said the housemaid.

'Slipped the top bolt, that's all,' said the footman, as he went to answer the bell.

'Let's lay them bits of lace out on the lawn, Cook, and leave 'em all night ; the frost 'll bleach 'em beautiful,' said the housemaid.

'Ah, so we might,' said Cook ; and taking some wet twisted-up scraps of lace from a basin, cook and housemaid tied their handkerchiefs round their necks, placed their aprons over their heads, and ran down a passage, unbolted the side-door, and went over the gravel drive to lay the lace upon the front lawn.

'I'll pop out and take them in when

I light the breakfast-room fire,' said the housemaid. 'My, what a lovely night! it must be full moon.'

'Scr-r-r-r-r-r-eech—screech—screech!' went the cook.

'Scre-e-e-e-e-ch-h-h-h!' went the housemaid, giving vent to a shrill cry that would have made an emulative locomotive burst in despair; and, still screaming, the two women clung together, and backed slowly to the house, ran down the passage to the kitchen, shrieking still, where the cook sank into a chair, which gave way beneath her, and she fell heavily on the floor.

'Are you mad, Mary—Cook? What is the matter?' exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, running into the kitchen, chamber-candlestick in hand, closely followed by Edward.

'They *are* mad—both on 'em!' growled the footman.

‘A ghost, a ghost!’ panted Mary, shuddering, and pointing towards the passage.

‘A ghost!’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon contemptuously. ‘You foolish wicked woman! How dare you alarm the children with such ridiculous, such absurd old grandmothers’ notions? You’ve been out, I suppose?’

‘Yes, yes!’ sobbed Mary, covering her blanched face with her hands.

‘And you saw something white, I suppose, in the moonlight?’

‘N—n—n—o, ’m! It was a black one, all but the horrid face with the moon on it.’

‘Edward,’ said Mrs. Brandon, ‘some one has been trying to frighten them, and they have left the passage door open. You are not afraid?’

‘How should I know till I see what it’s like!’ growled Edward. ‘Anyhow, I’ll go and try.’

‘I’ll go with you,’ said Mrs. Brandon.

Edward led the way to where the moonlight was streaming in through the open door, when he started back against his mistress, forcing her into the kitchen.

‘There *is* something, mum!’ he said hoarsely, ‘and I think I am a little afraid. No, no, ’m, you sha’n’t go. I’ll go first; I can’t stand that, if I am frightened.’

He again made a step in advance, for Mrs. Brandon was about to take the *pas*; but the next moment mistress and man drew involuntarily back, as, slowly, as if feeling its way through some thick darkness, hands stretched out, palms downward, to their fullest extent, head thrown back, wild eyes staring straight before it, and face unnaturally pale, came towards them a figure draped in black.

On and on, in a strange unearthly way, rigid as if of marble, came the figure across

the great kitchen, and in spite of herself Mrs. Brandon felt a strange thrill pass through her as she slowly gave way ; but followed still by the figure through the open door into the hall, where, reason re-asserting itself, she set down the candlestick upon the marble slab, and stood firm till the strange visitor came close up to her, and she took two cold stony hands in hers.

‘Ella, my child !’ she gasped.

It was as though those three words had dissolved a spell ; for the staring eyes slowly closed, a faint dawning as of a smile relaxed the rigid features, and, as the white lips parted, there came forth a low sigh as of relief, and then the form sank slowly down till it was supported only by the grasp Mrs. Brandon maintained upon the hands.

‘Here ! Quick ! Help, Edward !’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, blushing for her

excusable dread. 'Good Heavens, what infamy has been practised, that this poor child should seek refuge here in such a plight? Edward!'

'I'm here, ma'am,' cried the hard footman, smiting himself heavily upon the cheek. 'That I should have been such a fool! But 'twas enough to startle—'

'Man—man, don't talk!' cried his mistress. 'Run to Mr. Tiddson, he is the nearest; and don't tell him to come, but bring him. Do you hear?—*bring him!*'

'That I just will,' cried the man, giving one glance at the figure at his mistress's feet, and the next moment he was in the kitchen. 'Here, rouse up!' he cried, 'tain't nothing sooper—'

Edward said 'natural' as he ran out, hatless, into the frosty night to fetch the doctor, tying his handkerchief round his head as he sped on.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Brandon lifted the wasted form in her arms, and bore it to a couch, where she strove ineffectually to restore animation. Everything she tried seemed useless ; and at last, weeping bitterly, she sank upon her knees, and clasped the fragile figure to her heart, moaning as she did so :

‘My poor stricken bird ! my poor little dove ! what does it mean—what does it mean ?’

But the form she clasped might have been that from which the vital spark had just fled, save that the icy coldness began gradually to yield to the temperature of the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

LIGHT!—AND DARKNESS?

DR. TIDDSOON at last, panting and out of breath; for he had run the greater part of two miles, and upon hearing the few words Mrs. Brandon had to utter, he cast aside all the pedantry of his profession to which he clung, and knelt down by the inanimate form.

‘Every symptom of having passed through a state of fever,’ he said softly. ‘Slightly convulsed, even now,’ he muttered, as from the pulse his finger went to her face. ‘The candle a little nearer,’ he said, as he raised an eyelid. ‘Yes, I thought so! Lungs seem right. I’d stake my life she has but lately risen from a sick bed.

Heaven bless the poor child, she's worn to a skeleton! Here, quick, Edward!

'I'm here, sir,' growled the hard footman.

'Take that to my house,' he said, hurriedly writing some directions. 'Run, my good man, please.'

'I will, sir,' said Edward huskily, as a great tear ran trickling down his nose; 'but please tell me, sir—we all liked her very much—you—you don't think she'll die?'

'We'll hope not, Edward—we'll hope not,' said the doctor solemnly. 'Now go.'

Edward gave a great coarse sigh as he ran out of the room; but it was genuine sympathy, and worth a host of fine words.

'There's something more than ordinary disease here, Mrs. Brandon,' said the doctor. 'We'll watch by her to-night; and if

there is no change by morning, I should like to share the responsibility, and have the counsel of some able practitioner.'

They passed that night and many more by the wasted girl's bedside, during which time not once did she give sign of consciousness. Occasionally a faint fluttering of the pulse seemed to tell of returning power; but it was but a false hope held out.

An almost supernatural strength had enabled her to seek the refuge, where she had somehow, in the darkened state of her intellect, recalled that she would be welcome. Led almost by a subtle instinct, she had made her way by the different lines, and then exhausted her last powers in slowly walking over from Laneton, to sink inanimate at her protectress's feet.

It was long before her senses had thoroughly returned, so that she could recog-

nise those around, and speak in the faintest whisper ; but Mrs. Brandon trembled, for she judged by what she saw in the doctor's looks that it was but the precursor of a deeper sleep.

Several times over there was a faint whisper breathed into Mrs. Brandon's ear that the sufferer had much to say ; but invariably Mrs. Brandon closed those pale lips with a kiss.

‘Wrong or right, my poor child,’ she said sadly, ‘rest in peace, for this is your home.’

But there was an air of trouble and appeal in Ella's face that would not be gainsayed ; and one night Mrs. Brandon was seated by her side, when her lips parted to faintly whisper :

‘If I am to go, let me know that you all believe in me.’

As she spoke, her trembling little hand

drew a large envelope from beneath her pillow—a crumpled and bruised envelope.

‘Do you wish me to read this?’ said Mrs. Brandon tenderly.

Ella’s lips formed the word ‘Yes.’

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS.

THE first paper Mrs. Brandon drew from the envelope was one in a bold lady's-hand, evidently written hastily, and contained but the following words:

‘DEAR MAX,—I will take him into the waiting-room, where there is a good view of the platform. I can keep him there, *I think*. But you must be quick. Recollect, a momentary glance will do. Run by, if you can, at the very last minute. But pray, pray be careful. *It is victory or ruin; for he would never forgive either.* LAURA.

‘P.S. *Burn this*, and every note I send.’

Mrs. Brandon's face wore a troubled puzzled expression as she glanced at Ella, whose lips moved.

‘I found that in my reticule since I have lain here,’ she whispered. ‘Read on, and you will understand.’

Mrs. Brandon took out from the envelope another paper, and read, in a round legal hand :

‘*Cliff-terrace, Penzance, ———18—*

‘SIR,—I am requested by my patient, Mr. Charles Vining, to enclose the note here contained, one which, at his wish, I have addressed as you see. He tells me that he is doubtful of its reaching the lady if sent by post, and desires me to implore you to be its bearer, delivering it yourself, and adding your persuasions if she should decline compliance. He would have written more, but the note enclosed was penned in my brief absence, and I sternly forbade farther exertion. By way of explanation, I may tell you that my patient came in here,

with two more gentlemen, in a yacht, driven to the bay by stress of weather. The next night there was a fearful wreck close in shore, and Mr. Vining and one of his friends volunteered, and were out in the lifeboat. I regret to say that their gallant attempt only added to the long list of those gone to their account. Two of the lifeboat's crew were drowned, while your friend was cast upon the rocks fearfully injured.

‘Let me assure you that he has had the best advice the town affords.—I am, sir, your obedient servant,

‘HENRY PENELLYN, M.R.C.S.

‘TO MAXIMILIAN BRAY, Esq.

‘P.S. Mr. Vining bids me tell you that the above is his last request.

‘*I do not read to him the following: Not a moment is to be lost, for internal hæmorrhage has set in.*’

Mrs. Brandon's breath came thick and fast, as dashing down this letter, she took up the next.

‘MY ONLY LOVE,—*Pray* come to me. I am half killed.—Ever yours,

‘CHARLES VINING.’

‘But that is—stop a minute,’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon, who was terribly agitated, and she rang the bell. ‘Bring my desk quickly,’ she said to the maid who answered. ‘Yes,’ she exclaimed, as she unlocked the desk and drew out a letter, and compared it carefully. ‘It is the same hand. It is his writing!’

‘Yes,’ whispered Ella sadly.

‘What does it all mean, then?’ exclaimed Mrs. Brandon confusedly.

‘I cannot tell—I cannot understand,’ whispered Ella. ‘I was deceived and led

away, and he must have seen me; but he would not have betrayed me thus.'

'But how to explain it all!' cried Mrs. Brandon excitedly. 'He is to be married to Laura Bray—'

'Ah!'

'Ah, me! What have I done, what have I said?' cried Mrs. Brandon. 'My poor child, I must have been mad to have let my foolish lips utter those words!' And she gently raised the fainting girl in her arms; for at those bitter words, Ella had uttered that faint sigh, her face had been contracted as by a violent spasm, and her eyes had closed.

'It is nothing,' sighed Ella, reviving. 'If he is only happy!'

'Happy!' cried Mrs. Brandon, her breast heaving with passion. 'It is some cruel conspiracy. But tell me—if you can bear to speak—tell me all.'

It was a long recital; for it was told in a faint whisper, and spread over some time, Ella's strength seeming often to fail her. Twice over Mrs. Brandon would have arrested her, but she begged to be allowed to proceed.

'It will make me happier,' she whispered. And Mrs. Brandon could only bend her head.

Three o'clock had struck by the pendule, whose slow beat seemed to be numbering off Ella's last minutes, when Mrs. Brandon left her in the charge of the nurse she had summoned, sleeping now calmly, and as if relieved by confiding her sad little last month's history to another breast.

It was late; but Mrs. Brandon had another duty to perform, one which she did, with her mind now confused, now seeming to see plainly the whole of the plot. But there was that letter—those lines in Charley

Vining's hand. But for them, all would have been plain.

At times she was moved by a burning indignation; at others she weakly wept; but before returning to Ella's bedside, she took a large sheet of paper, secured to it the three missives she had brought from the bedside, and then wrote under them:

‘CHARLES VINING,—The victim of a cruel plot—Ella Bedford—was enticed from the home I had found for her by Maximilian Bray, from whom she escaped, to crawl, *dying*, to my house, where she now lies, to breathe her last in peace. As an English gentleman, I ask you, Have you had any hand in this? If not, explain how a letter should be sent to her in your handwriting. I can see part; but the rest remains for you to clear. EMILY BRANDON.’

This letter Mrs. Brandon carefully

sealed, with its contents, and then returned to watch by Ella's bedside.

Soon after eight that morning she dispatched the note by a trusty messenger, to be delivered into no other hands than Charley Vining's—little wotting the events to take place that day—and into Charley Vining's hands that letter was placed, as we have seen.

Sir Philip Vining's coachman was the first to recover himself and to go to his master's assistance, just as, half stunned and confused, Sir Philip was struggling to his feet.

'Not much hurt, I think!' said Sir Philip. 'But where is Mr. Bray?'

'There he lies, Sir Philip,' said the coachman.

And together they went to raise the unfortunate companion of their ride, insen-

sible now, and bleeding from a cut on the temple.

‘Beg pardon, Sir Philip,’ said the coachman appealingly. ‘I’ve been with you fifteen years now; I hope you won’t turn me off for this job. I was driving as carefully as I could.’

‘My good fellow, no; of course not. I was to blame. Thank Heaven there are some men coming!—Bray, my dear friend, how is it with you?’

Mr. Bray looked up on being addressed, and, with a little assistance, rose to his feet; but he was weak and helpless, seating himself directly after.

In spite of the serious aspect of affairs, a little examination proved that, though cut about, and some of the harness injured, the horses were very little the worse; while, with the exception of the loss of some paint and a smashed panel, the car-

riage, on being placed in its normal position, was found to be quite capable of continuing its journey. Plenty of help had arrived, and the labourers had worked with a will; but upon Mr. Bray being assisted to his seat, he seemed so ill and shaken, that Sir Philip gave orders for the carriage to make the best of its way home.

‘But you will come too?’ said Mr. Bray feebly.

‘No,’ said Sir Philip, frowning angrily; ‘I shall go forward.’

And then, without another word, he strode off in the direction of Laneton.

Mr. Bray was for following him; but the coachman shook his head.

‘Master’s as good and true-hearted a gentleman as ever breathed, sir. Here’s fifty—ah, with the way them horses are marked, a hundred and fifty—pounds’ worth of damage done in a moment. And

does he do what ninety masters out of a hundred would have done—tell me to leave to-morrow? Not he, sir. He just claps me on the shoulder, and says it was his own fault—which it really was, sir, though lots wouldn't have owned to it. But no, sir; Sir Philip's orders was to take you home, and disobeying his orders means throwing away a good place.'

So, as Sir Philip disappeared down the lane, the carriage was once more put in motion, and dragged heavily through the muddy rutty by-way back towards Lexville.

It was a long and dreary ride, performed in a slow and spiritless way, Mr. Bray shrinking back in his seat as they reached and drove through the town; for, in addition to bodily pain, there was the mental suffering—the blow at his pride; for it seemed, though he could not penetrate the

mystery, that there was something radically wrong, and that all prospect of the wedding taking place was at an end.

In spite of his shrinking back, he could not avoid seeing the curiosity-moved faces at door and window; and, in his heart, he fancied he could make out what was said respecting pride and its fall, for his family was not very popular at Lexville; while the state of horses, carriage, and coachman all tended to make people hurry out to gaze upon this sequel to the broken-off wedding, the theme now of every gossip in the place.

‘It never rains but it pours,’ says the old saw; and so it seemed to be here; for upon Mr. Bray alighting at the Elms, stiff and bruised and giddy, it was to find Laura—now that she was hidden from the public gaze, where she had held up so bravely, even to taking her place calmly in the

waiting carriage—falling from one violent hysterical fit into another, shrieking and raving against Max, and crying out that what had befallen her was a judgment.

Mother, sister, friends, all listened in weeping amazement as they tried to soothe and minister to her, but in vain; and it was not until the coming of the family medical man, and a soothing draught had been administered, that Laura sank back, silent and overcome.

The doctor was still busy, when Sir Philip Vining's carriage drove up with a fresh patient, one who sadly needed his services; while, as Mr. Bray was lying bandaged, and at length somewhat more at ease, a servant brought up a telegram.

'News, then, at last, from Charley Vining!' exclaimed Mrs. Bray excitedly, breaking the official envelope.

But Mrs. Bray was wrong. The tele-

gram contained news, startling news—such as made the father forget his own sufferings, and rise again to prepare for a journey; and upon its being inadvertently conveyed to Laura some time after, she threw up her hands, shrieked aloud, and then seemed to shrink, trembling within herself, as if expecting momentarily that some great blow would fall crushingly upon her.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SLEEP OR DEATH?

THE telegram to the Bray family was from the little Gloucestershire town, telling what the hotel-keepers were at length able to impart, through a letter they had found in his portmanteau, after missing it in previous searches, that Max Bray was lying in a precarious state, the result of an accident upon the railway.

For Max had so far escaped with life, but he had not yet awoke to consciousness, and to know that he was occupying the couch of her whom he had long marked down as his victim. As the railway passenger had remarked, Max had fallen where the platform sloped; but he was suffering

from concussion of the brain; and one maimed limb had been removed by the surgeon's knife.

But we must leave him to his slow recovery, while the landlady declared in confidence to her husband every night, that she had always known that Williams was an assumed name, because there was a 'B' on the gentleman's socks.

Sir Philip Vining reached Laneton at last, to see his chariot standing in the inn-yard; but he knew, without questioning the grooms, where Charley would be; and fierce now with the anger that burned within him, he made his way to Copse Hall, to be told that his son was by Miss Bedford's couch, where he had been since he arrived.

For, after a furious gallop, the chariot had dashed up to Copse Hall covered with mud, the horses in a foam and ready to

drop, while, springing up more like a mad-man than one in possession of his full senses, Charley had leaped out, and almost forced his way to Ella's side, to fall sobbing on his knees as he clasped her thin transparent hand, a faint smile welcoming his coming, as, with her soul seeming to leap from her longing eyes, she vainly strove to turn towards him.

Mrs. Brandon stayed to ask no explanation then ; for she was alarmed at the fierce rage that flashed from Charley's eyes at her first words, as he stood there in his wedding garments.

She left the explanation for some other time, and, trembling and excited, she left them alone, to find from the servants, upon descending, that this was to have been Charley Vining's wedding-morn.

But Ella must have heard some explanation ; for when, nearly two hours after, Mrs.

Brandon went to the room to whisper to the son of the father's coming, that softly-shaded head was lying upon Charley's arm, and there was a sweet satisfied smile upon those pale lips. But as Ella's eyes opened, and she saw Mrs. Brandon approach, they wore that old piteous appealing look, and she whispered,

‘For I love him!’

The words were meant for Mrs. Brandon; but they went no farther than Charley's ear, to bring a wild convulsive sob from his breast, as in his despair he felt that it was too late.

‘Let him come here!’ cried Charley sternly, as Mrs. Brandon whispered of his father's coming. ‘Let him come here!’ And then, as, black and frowning, Sir Philip strode into the room, he turned towards him.

‘Well!’ exclaimed Charley, staying the

flood of reproaches Sir Philip was about to heap upon his head; and, as he gazed upon the pale face, the father's aspect changed, his stride became a gentle step, and he gazed from one to the other. 'Well,' cried Charley, 'have you come to look upon their work? Have you come to commune once more with the sweet gentle spirit before it passes away? I tell you they have murdered her—murdered my own darling who would have died for me; whilst I, poor, weak, pitiful idiot that I was, believed all I saw—walked blindly into their traps like a foolish child. Curse them—curse them!' he raged, as he ground his teeth together, and spoke in a low hoarse voice, that was awful in its deep suppressed hatred. 'You want to know why I dashed off this morning. I tell you, it was to save myself from being a murderer. I tell you, father, that after what I learned on leaving you, if I

had faced that cursed Jezebel, it would have been to strangle her. There—there, read those letters!’ he cried, tearing the papers from his breast, and dashing them at Sir Philip. ‘Read how brother and sister could plot to delude this poor child—plot with a diabolical cunning that was nearly crowned with success; for they had a simple unworldly man to deal with; read how we were to be torn asunder by their cursed malice—how I was to be poisoned at heart by seeing her appear to flee with that scoundrel Max Bray; while I, like a simple sheep, was led by that false wretch to see it all. She played her cards well—to become Lady Vining, forsooth! And then read on how this poor angel was beguiled by lying forgeries to hurry away with Max to Cornwall, to see me—me—dying from injuries; while, to give force to his lies, the villain added to, and then sent,

the note, that must have been lying in his desk above a year—the note I sent to him, telling him to come to me, for I was half-killed, when I had my hunting fall. God!’ he hissed forth in a fierce way, that made his hearers tremble, ‘God! that my right hand had withered away before it penned a line! But no, no!’ he exclaimed, and his teeth grated, ‘I shall want this right hand yet; for the day of reckoning shall surely come!’

There was something fearful in the young man’s aspect, as down there upon one knee by the bedside, his left arm beneath that fair golden-clustered head, he clenched his right hand, and, gazing before him at vacancy, he shook that clenched hand fiercely, and his mad rage was such that could he have grasped Max Bray then, he would have dashed him down, and crushed his heel upon his false cruel face,

for he knew not of the retribution that had already fallen to the deceiver's lot.

But the next moment Charley Vining turned to look down upon the pale horror-stricken face at his side, when the rugged brow was smoothed, the clenched hand dropped, and a deep groan burst from the young man's breast.

'O, heaven forgive me! What am I saying? Father, father,' he cried, in pitiful tones, 'they've broken my heart!'

And then, the strong man humbled, he bowed down over the bedside till his agony-distorted face rested upon that fluttering breast; and weak now as the weakest, he wept like a child, his broad shoulders heaving from the convulsive sobs that burst forth with the wild hysterical violence of a woman's grief.

'Charley, my son,' gasped Sir Philip at last, as he knelt by the young man's side,

and laid his hand upon his head, 'you do not think—you cannot think—that I knew of all this?'

'No—no—no!' groaned Charley. 'I never thought it.'

CHAPTER XXV.

HOPE RISES.

‘It is cruel, monstrous!’ exclaimed Sir Philip, after a long pause. ‘But, O my boy, what have I done? I thought to make you honoured and loved of all. My sole desire was to make you happy and content. But, my boy, you will forgive me. I humble myself to you. I was wrong.’

‘Hush, hush, father!’ cried Charley sternly, as he raised one arm, and laid it upon his father’s shoulder. ‘What have I to forgive in you?’

He turned again, gazing with a despairing, stunned expression upon Ella’s face.

‘But,’ cried Sir Philip hastily, ‘what has been done?—Mrs. Brandon, what medical advice have you had?’

‘The best that money can procure,’ said Mrs. Brandon, in a choking voice. ‘We have done all that is possible.’

There was a dead silence now reigning in that chamber, broken at last by Sir Philip, as, forgetful of all else but the fearful wrong that had been done the suffering girl before him, he bent over Ella to kiss her tenderly.

‘O my child, my child!’ he moaned, ‘my poor child! I came here angry and bitter to upbraid; but has it come to this? that you, so young, so pure, must leave us to go where all is love, to bear witness to my selfish pride and ambition? Heaven forgive me!’ he sobbed, as his tears fell fast upon the little hand he held, ‘heaven forgive me! for, in my blindness, I have broken two loving hearts—sacrificed them to my insensate pride! Blind—blind—blind that I was, not to remember that the

love of a pure true-hearted woman was a gem beyond price. Has it indeed come to this, that there is nothing to be done but for a poor, weak, blind old man to ask forgiveness for your wrongs?—Charley,' he sobbed, turning to his son, 'my boy—my pride, the hope of my old age, forgive me, for I can never forgive myself!'

'Father, for heaven's sake, hush!' cried Charley in his blank despair. 'This is too much. I cannot bear it. I have nothing to forgive. It was our fate; but, O!' he said huskily, as he drew Ella nearer to his breast, 'it is hard—hard—hard to bear!'

Here Mrs. Brandon interposed; it was too much for the sufferer to encounter; and gently drawing the young man away, she bent over to whisper to Ella, but, in obedience to a whispered wish, she drew back, as Charley, weak now and trembling, gazed in his father's quivering face for a

few moments, and then, as did the patriarch of old, he fell upon the loving old man's neck and kissed him, and wept sore.

The silence then in that sad chamber was painful; but at last, trembling in every limb, Sir Philip crept to the bedside, to take the place lately occupied by his son—to pass one arm beneath Ella's neck, and then, with all a father's gentle love, to raise her more and more, till her head, with all that glory of bright fair hair, rested upon his breast, and his old and wrinkled cheek touched the vein-mapped, transparent forehead.

‘If I could die for you, my child,’ he murmured; ‘if my few poor useless days could be given, that you might live, I should be content. Heaven hear my prayer!’ he cried piteously. ‘Poor sufferer! Has she not borne enough? Have we not all tried our best to make her way thorny and

harsh? O my child, I loved you from the first, though my pride would not let me acknowledge it, and I left you that day moved almost beyond human power to bear; while, on my return, even the eyes of my wife's poor semblance seemed, from the canvas, almost to look—to look down upon me with reproach. But you must not leave us—surely our prayers must be heard—you, so young, so gentle! My poor blighted flower! But you will live to bless us both—to be my stay and comfort—to help a weak old man tenderly along his path to the grave—to be the hope and stay of my boy—to be my pride! I ask you—I ask you this—I, his father, ask you to live for us, to bless us both with your pure and gentle love! Charley my boy, here—quick—quick—My God, she is dying!

A faint shudder had passed through Ella's frame as Sir Philip uttered that ex-

clamation, and her pinched pale face looked more strange and unearthly than ever; but she had heard every word uttered by the old man; words which, feeble as she was, had made her heart leap with a strange joy, sending life and energy once more through every vein and nerve, but only with the effect of a few drops of oil upon an expiring flame: the light sprang up for a few moments, and then seemed to sink lower and lower, till, with a shiver of dread, Mrs. Brandon softly approached.

She paused though, for at that moment Ella's eyes softly unclosed, to gaze trustingly at Sir Philip Vining. Then they were turned to Charley; and as they rested there, her pale lips parted, but no word came. A faint sad smile of content, though, flitted for an instant over her face, and those lips spoke in silence their wishes--wishes read by heartbroken Charley, who, resting

one hand upon his father's shoulder, pressed upon that pale rosebud of a mouth a long, long kiss of love, one, though, to which there was no response. He did not even feel the soft fluttering breath, playing and hesitating, as it were, round her lips as her eyes slowly closed.

Was it in sleep or in death? The question was mentally asked again and again; but no one spoke, as all stood there watching—hardly daring to breathe.

Night had come, and still no movement, no trace by which hope could be for a moment illumined, and still they watched on; Lexville, the Brays, everything, being forgotten in this great sorrow. But with the night came again the doctor, with an old friend and physician; then followed a long consultation in the sick chamber, and another in the drawing-room, while friend

and lover waited tremblingly for the sentence to be pronounced.

‘My friend thinks with me that there is a change,’ said Mr. Tiddson; ‘and really, Mrs. Brandon, in the whole course of my practice, nothing ever gave me greater pleasure.’

The next day, and the lamp of life still burning, but the brain-symptoms had passed away, in spite of the great excitement. There was extreme weakness, but soon that was all; and until, joyful and exultant, Sir Philip avowed to himself that the danger was past, he did not return to Blandfield Court.

‘Saved, my boy, saved! our prayers were heard!’ he exclaimed then fervently; and from that day Sir Philip seemed to know no rest when he was away from the invalid chamber.

Scandal and wonders seldom last above

their reputed nine days ; and so it seemed here at Lexville. People talked tremendously, and commented upon the absence of the Vinings, and their treatment of their old friends, the Brays. But from the Bray family themselves came not one word of rebuke or complaint. They started for London the day but one after that appointed for the wedding, to take up, as it proved, their permanent residence in Harley-street ; and at the end of a month it was announced that The Elms was for sale ; and, at a great price, the local auctioneer disposed of the whole of ‘ Mr. Onesimus Bray’s well-known and carefully-selected live and dead farming stock,’ in spite of the old-fashioned farmers’ head-shaking and nods and winks.

But, as time wore on, though the past was never again reverted to, pudgy quiet Mr. Bray more than once had a snug *tête-*

à-tête club dinner with his old friend Sir Philip Vining, and they parted in the best of fellowship.

And now we must ask our readers to follow us hastily through a few scenes, whose intent is to fill up voids in our narrative, and to bring it more quickly to a close.

Any one who knows the neighbourhood of Blandfield and Laneton will acknowledge that no more pleasant piece of rural undulating country can be found within a radius of fifty miles round London; and through those pleasant dales and glades, day after day of the bright spring-time, might one or other of Sir Philip Vining's carriages be seen with the old gentleman himself in constant attendance upon his chosen daughter. His love had long been withheld, but now it was showered down abundantly.

The slightest increase of pallor, a warm flush, anything, was sufficient to arouse the worthy old man's alarms. And they were not quite needless; for the struggle back to health was on Ella Bedford's part long and protracted.

Charley Vining used to declare that he was quite excluded, and that he did not get anything like a fair share of Ella's heart; but the warm glow of pleasure which suffused his face, as he saw the pride and affection Sir Philip had in his son's choice, was, as Mrs. Brandon used to say, 'a sight to make any one happy.'

Often and often Mrs. Brandon used to declare that the Vinings might just as well come and take up their residence altogether at Copse Hall, for she should never think of parting with Ella; while, as the summer came in, and with it strength and brightness of eye to the invalid, Sir Philip Vining's

great pleasure was, just before leaving of an evening, just as it was growing dusk, to lead Ella to the piano, where, unasked, she would plaintively sing him the old ballad that had once drawn a tear from Charley Vining's eye, when he had told the singer that he was glad Sir Philip was not present.

And on those occasions, seated with his back to the light, and his forehead down upon his hand, the old man would be carried far back into the days of the past, when the wife he loved was with him; and as the sweet low notes rose and fell, now loud and clear, now soft and tremulous with pathos, Sir Philip's lip would tremble, and more than once, when he bade her good-night, Ella felt that his cheek was wet.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT LAST.

THE summer was drawing to an end; the ripe tints of the coming autumn were beginning to appear in many a rich clump of trees; but Sir Philip said, in his quiet courtly style, that Blandfield Court had never looked to greater advantage; for Mrs. Brandon, her daughters, and Ella, had spent the day there.

And now, in the warm glow of a pleasant evening, just before dew-fall, Charley Vining was leading his fair betrothed along alley after alley, her light dress rustling from time to time among the first-fallen leaves. Hours upon hours they had spent alone together during her return to health; but never till this eve had Ella felt so

great a tremor as that which now pervaded her frame. Was it that his eyes had spoken more eloquently than usual? She could not say; but now that he halted by the tree from which a rose had once been plucked, and led her to the garden-seat, there was no resistance, and she suffered him to draw her to his side closer, closer, closer still, till her fair hair mingled with his crisp curls, and her soft breath played upon his cheek.

‘My own,’ he cried softly, but in tremulous tones, ‘six months have passed now since I made you a promise.’

‘Yes,’ she whispered, as her hands rested upon his shoulder; and she nestled closer to his broad breast, dove-like in the gentleness and aspect of seeking protection where she knew she would be safe.

‘I have kept the promise,’ he said again.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘to forgive, as we hope to be forgiven.’

There was silence then for a few moments before he spoke again.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘I claim my reward. Ella dearest, my own, can you forgive my weakness, my doubts, my boyish folly?’

‘Forgive?’ she said; and as she gazed up in his face there was a look of proud joy before her eyes sank, and her head drooped, blushing before his loving glance.

‘I was weak, I own, mad; but tell me, Ella dearest. I have been patient.’

His voice was low as he pressed her still closer to his heart.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘tell me when;’ and his voice had sunk to a whisper.

‘Charley — husband,’ she whispered, raising her eyes once more to his, ‘I am yours—when you will!’

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE REWARD OF MERIT—BAI JOVE!

PEOPLE will talk, and the more you try to regulate your life by their opinions, the worse you will fare. Vide 'The Old Man and his Ass.'

They said it was too bad that the heir to Blandfield Court should be married in London; but whether too bad or no, in the course of the autumn Charles Vining and his lady were announced as having departed for the Continent after a particular ceremony at St. George's, Hanover-square; a church where the wedding-fees must amount to something tolerably respectable in the course of the year; while, if at any time it should be announced that the clerk,

beadle, and pew-opener all have country houses at Sydenham, Teddington, or some other pleasant spot a few miles from Babel smoke, and give champagne dinners, the writer, for one, will feel no surprise; though a feeling of envy may spring up in his breast the next time he encounters the gorgeous beadle sunning himself upon the broad steps of the sacred fane.

But the wedding trip was short on account of Sir Philip, who, though he did not complain, showed by his letters how eagerly he was looking forward to their return, which soon followed; and for them life glided on in a pleasant round of social enjoyment, either at Blandfield or the house Sir Philip had secured in Westbournia.

Two years had glided by, when, so as to do as others do in the season, Charley Vining was escorting his bonnie wife through the exhibition of the Royal Academy, though,

truth to say, Charley had more than once been guilty of yawning as he stood before a grand specimen of Turner-esque painting, for he said that he liked to see that sort of thing in a state of nature.

They were passing from one room to another, when suddenly there fell upon Charley Vining's ears a strange sound—not loud, in fact it was very faint, but it was peculiar, and being somewhat bored and tired by the pictures, any little thing sufficed to attract his attention.

‘Squea—eek, squea—eek, squea—eek!’ went the noise, as of some mechanism slightly in want of oil; when, as Charley turned, his face suddenly became suffused, his broad chest swelled, his teeth were set, and his fists clenched, as, with flashing eyes, he looked like some refined and polished lion about to make a spring upon an enemy.

Ella saw what had attracted his attention at the same moment, and trembling like an aspen, the blood fled from her face, and her hands closed on her husband's arm as she tried to draw him away.

But she might as well have tried to move an oak, as the stalwart frowning Hercules who stood there gazing over his shoulder at a most carefully-dressed man, walking with a peculiar limp—a halt which told of a cork leg, without the wheezing squeak it gave at every mincingly-taken step.

Apparently familiarised to the noise himself, the dandy did not perceive that it attracted the attention of others as he moved along, catalogue in one hand, in the other the thin red-leather cord attached to a vixenish-looking toy terrier—an uncomfortable-looking little beast, that kept running between his legs or over the sweep-

ing train of the elderly vinegary-featured lady by his side, winding the leather thong round the sound or else the cork leg, and once, in a rapid *pas*, securely binding the two; so that, what with his eyeglass, his catalogue, and the dog, the gentleman seemed to have his hands completely filled.

‘What picture is that, Maximilian?’ suddenly exclaimed the lady, in a tone that was as acid as her looks; and she stopped short, with her back to Charley and Ella, and by the help of a gold eye-glass inspected a painting.

There was no response; for the dog, the cork leg, and the thong, were in a state of tangle.

‘Maximilian, I asked you the name of that picture!’ cried the lady more shrilly.

‘Bai Jove, there, don’t be in such a hurry; don’t you see what a confounded mess I’m in? There, now, hold Finette,

while I look at the catalogue. Let me see, ah ! yaas ! No. 369. "Dandy of the days of Charles II." Bai Jove, ah ! very fair indeed. Pity that style of dress don't come in again.'

'Squea-eek, squea-eek, squea-eek' went the leg, as the admirers of the cavalier passed slowly on ; while, as they mingled with the throng, a long pent-up breath escaped from Charley Vining's breast, and apparently greatly relieved, he exclaimed aloud :

'Poor devil !'

'Pray take me out, Charley,' whispered Ella ; and for the first time he noticed her pallor.

'Take you out ? to be sure !' he cried, as he tenderly drew her hand farther through his arm. 'Really, though, for a moment or two, I felt as if I could have wrung his neck.'

‘Charley, dear husband!’ whispered Ella; for at that moment there was again the sound of the leg, and Charley’s breast began to swell and his eyes to flash.

‘All right, little one, take me away,’ he said, smiling; ‘for I feel like a big dog scenting a rat. But there, my own, I’m frightening you; come along.’

He drew her rapidly away towards the entrance, her breath coming more freely at every step; but not so fast but that they caught another glimpse of the lady and gentleman, standing in rapt attention before a fresh picture, and at the same moment heard, in tones that seemed as if they were expressive of profound admiration:

‘Bai Jove!’

But that was the last time they ever saw Max Bray.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOME.

A WEEK after, Charley and Ella were in the hall, and about to leave their house, when there was a summons at the door, and they retreated to the drawing-room.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Lingon,’ announced the butler the next minute; and a fair fat young man entered, with a tall handsome lady, who threw back her mantle, and rushed at Ella, to clasp her in her arms, kissing and sobbing over her for a minute, before darting away, rushing at Charley Vining, throwing her arms round his neck, and kissing him with a loud smack.

‘There! I forgot!’ she exclaimed the next

moment, half laughing, half crying; 'but you won't mind, dear Hugh, it's only old Charley Vining, whom I've loved ever since I was a tiny girl. But my own dear, dear, darling Miss Bedford—for I can't ever call you anything else—I am so, so, so glad to see you again. And we were only married yesterday, and I wouldn't go anywhere else till Hugh brought me to see you both. And you will love me still, won't you?'

As she spoke she threw herself on the carpet at Ella's feet, clasping her round the waist, and nestling closely to her, and in spite of every effort, insisting upon staying there till they left.

There was no going out that day; for London ceremony had to be set aside for country hospitality, and it was late when the Lingons left, to start the next morning for Paris; as quaint, but as amiable

and happy a couple as ever the sun shone upon.

But before leaving, heedless of his darkened brow, Nelly Lingon told Charley that Max was married to 'such an old screw-cum—a rich old dowager; while Laura'—and she spoke now sadly—'Laura ran off with a French count, when we were all at Baden; and I'm afraid he's a brute to her. But I'm sorry for Laura, Charley,' said Nelly; 'for, after her fashion, I think she loved you!'

How the years glide by! Blandfield again, with Charley Vining more portly and noble-looking than ever. It is a glorious sunshiny day, and in his broad hat and velvet coat he looks free, happy, and hearty, as he leads a little gem of an Exmoor pony in either hand, on one of which is a sturdy-looking curly-headed boy, shouting with

glee, and drumming the pony's sides with his little heels ; on the other, a sweet-faced girl a couple of years older, whose fair hair hangs down to the waist of her tiny riding-habit.

But we have not done. Standing by a chair, placed upon the lawn, her hand held by Sir Philip Vining, not looking a day older, but watching with a grandfather's fondness the children led round and round, is Ella—the same sweet-faced gentle Ella as of old, with the same glorious clusters and braids looped back from her pure white forehead. There is a glow, too, upon her countenance—it may be from pride, or merely that from the sun, as she holds a shade above her shapely head.

And there we leave her in her home of peace, rich in the love of her husband, her children, and that of her new parent, whose great delight upon one occasion it was to

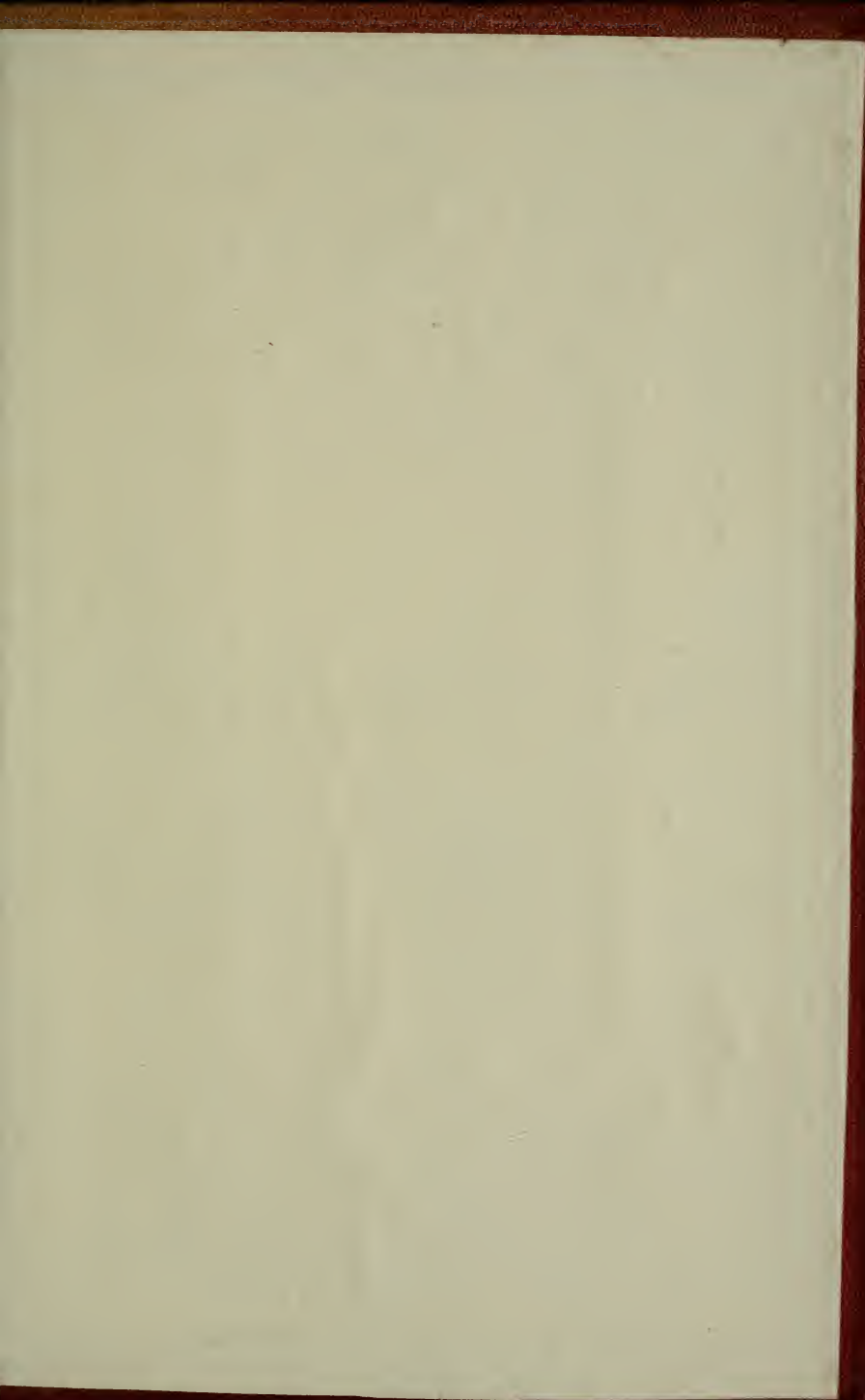
superintend the placing of Ella's portrait in the library, side by side with the picture upon which he loved to gaze.

‘How well they match, Charley!’ Sir Philip said. ‘It is like making my room complete—her face is so soft and gentle. It is a splendid likeness. God bless her! she makes glad my old age; and,’ he added, with a glance of his old pride, ‘she is by birth a lady!’

THE END.

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